MOLIÈRE

by

Philip Moeller

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MOLIÈRE

PLAYS BY
PHILIP MOELLER

MADAME SAND
FIVE SOMEWHAT HISTORICAL PLAYS
MOLIÈRE

MOLIÈRE

A Romantic Play in Three Acts

by

PHILIP MOELLER

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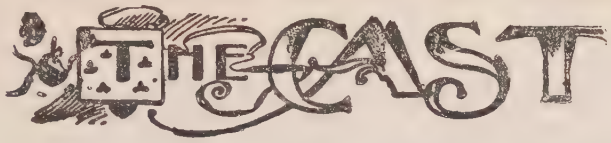
Gratefully

to

Henry Miller

with thanks for his
sympathetic help
in the making
of my play



WEEK COMMENCING FEBRUARY 24, 1919

MATINEES WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAY

HENRY MILLER
BLANCHE BATES
HOLBROOK BLINN
ESTELLE WINWOOD

IN

"MOLIERE"

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY PHILIP MOELLER

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT I. ARE:

BARON, a young member of Moliere's company.... JAMES P. HAGEN
LA FOREST, Moliere's cook and friend..ALICE GALE
ARMANDE BEJART, Moliere's wife..... ESTELLE WINWOOD
MOLIERE .....HENRY MILLER
COLINGE, an old actor.....FORREST ROBINSON
DE LUZON, a courtier.....FREDERICK ROLAND
THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN....WILLARD BARTON
LOUIS XIV., King of France.....HOLBROOK BLINN
FRANCOISE, MARQUISE DE MONTESPAN, the King's Mistress.....BLANCHE BATES
LA FONTAINE.....SIDNEY HERBERT

The scene is Moliere's study in his theatre at the Palais Royal, Paris.

The time is a morning in September, 1672.

PROGRAM OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE, FEBRUARY 24, 1919
AT FORD'S THEATRE, BALTIMORE, MD.

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT II. ARE:

LA FONTAINE.....SIDNEY HERBERT
FRANCOISE, MARQUISE DE MONTESPAN.....
BLANCHE BATES
HERCULES, a black boy, page to Madame de Montespan.....REMO BUFANO
GIOVANNI LULLI, the court musician..PAUL DOUCET
FIRST LADY IN WAITING TO DE MONTESPAN....
MARY PYNE
SECOND LADY IN WAITING TO DE MONTESPAN
MARGERY CARD
A LACKEY.....WILLIAM ROBINS
MOLIERE.....HENRY MILLER
LOUIS XIV.....HOLBROOK BLINN

The scene is the apartments of Madame de Montespan.

The time is twilight of the same day as Act I.

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT III. ARE:

CLAUDE CHAPELLE, a friend of Moliere.....
VINCENT CHAMBERS
LA FONTAINE.....SIDNEY HERBERT
LA FOREST.....ALICE GALE
A DOCTOR.....WALLACE ROBERTS
COLINGE.....FORREST ROBINSON
BARON.....JAMES P. HAGEN
MOLIERE.....HENRY MILLER
ARMANDE BEJART.....ESTELLE WINWOOD
THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN.....WILLARD BARTON
LOUIS XIV.....HOLBROOK BLINN

The scene is the same as Act I.

The time is before, during and after the fourth performance of Moliere's "Imaginary Invalid," February, 1673.

During Act III. the curtain is lowered to denote the passing of two hours' time.

Scenery designed by Lee Simonson. Costumes designed by Rollo Peters and executed by Mme. Freisinger. Incidental music composed by Cassius Freeborn.

ACT I

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT I ARE

BARON, *a lad of seventeen, a member of Molière's Company.*

LA FOREST, *a woman of sixty-eight, Molière's cook and friend.*

ARMANDE BÉJART, *Molière's wife.*

JEAN BAPTISTE POQUELIN, *known to the world as Molière.*

COLINGE, *an old actor, a member of the troupe since the beginning.*

DE LAUZUN, *a young Courtier.*

THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN.

LOUIS XIV, *King of France.*

FRANÇOISE ATHÉNAÏS DE MONTESPAN, *the King's Mistress.*

LA FONTAINE, *the Writer of the Fables,*

and

Several Courtiers and one or two Ladies in Waiting to de Montespan.

The scene is Molière's Study in his Theatre at the Palais Royal in Paris.

The time of the action of Act I is the morning of a day in September, 1672.

ACT I

MOLIÈRE'S *study in his theatre at the Palais Royal. A room of quiet magnificence and careful luxury. About are beautiful bits of furniture and in the walls shelves from which gleam the silent faces of the best in books. In a corner is an antique chest from which hang the ends of rich costumes. In the centre the work table of the Master on which is a pile of sheets of an unfinished masterpiece. A door down right leads to the entrance from the street. In back in the centre is the door to Molière's dressing room. In the left wall, down front, is a big door giving on the stage of the theatre. The room is flooded with sunlight that streams in thru the mullioned windows and one is open and a piercing shaft of light falls upon the corner of the table where lies the manuscript of "The Misanthrope." In a corner of the room are some empty bottles and two or three hampers from the pastry-cook, the remnants of the feast of the night before. When the curtain lifts*

Baron *is discovered asleep in the window niche. A church bell from a neighbouring tower sounds ten. A seller of cakes passing in the streets cries his wares. A bell in the farther distance sounds the hour. The boy sits up and rubs his eyes. "Cakes, pastries," calls the voice of the vendor.*

Baron

[*Leaning out of the window.*]

Are you calling me? What? What?

The Voice

Cakes, Madeleines, delicious pastries.

Baron

None, good-morning, thank you, I'm too full of last night.

[*The voice dies away in the distance and the boy yawningly falls back to sleep. A moment later* La Forest *enters and begins bustling about arranging the room in order. The sight of the hampers and the bottles angers her. At first she does not see* Baron *but as she passes the window niche he moves in his sleep.*]

La Forest

Wake up, it's past the hour.

Baron

[*Sitting up.*]

Eh?

La Forest

Out with you now.

Baron

Here's where I fell asleep in the midst of the party yesterday evening.

La Forest

Well, yesterday evening's over. It's a wonder what he has you about for at all, drinking his wine and wasting his hours.

Baron

Why shouldn't I be here? Have you forgotten I'm a member of the troupe of Molière?

La Forest

La, la, you little upstart! If I had my way I'd spank you to death, hang you out to dry and then send you off for a year to make love to the cows in Scotland.

Baron

There's likelier meat for love right here in Paris. And besides, I'll not be answered by you. I'm an artist and you're only a cook.

La Forest

[*Laughing.*]

An artist, indeed, you and your seventeen years. One would think you as great as the master.

Baron

Some day, perhaps, I'll be greater.

La Forest

Some day I'll be Queen of France.

Baron

Not with your face, my darling, though I tell you the queen is no beauty. But Madame de Montespan, ah, she is as fair as the day. Do you know what they're whispering of her, my nymph of the pantries?

La Forest

No, get up and get out.

Baron

It's this, my princess of stews. [*Then very mysteriously.*] They say that whilst she gives gifts to one Molière's wife, she'd rather be giving her love to Molière.

La Forest

Begone now, you with your dirty talk of the courts.

Baron

When you're as wise as I, La Forest, you will know that the Court and its master, the King, is the sun by which we live, all of us, even the great Molière.

La Forest

The great Molière, indeed. God help him. He ought to be off in the country getting the good of the air and not here in the stench of the Court and the stench of the city, and up 'till dawn with you and the others. Madame, his wife, was singing, I suppose?

Baron

Like the lifting lark till the bells rang four and I tumbled off to sleep. Where's your master?

La Forest

Out long since. He was pacing his room till morning and now he's down by the river talking to the barge men. He likes to mix with the crowds when there's something that knocks in his head that he doesn't want to hear. Madame was gay, you say?

Baron

And he, he too.

La Forest

The doctors have warned him. He's always so

weary when you're back from playing at the palace and then up till dawn, night in and night out. If he'd only listen to me.

Baron

[*Jeeringly.*]

You!

La Forest

If he doesn't—well—

Baron

My poor La Forest. What a little soul is yours! To be bothering about what may happen when life at the moment's gay. God should kill all ravens like you who croak when the sun is shining.

La Forest

Maybe you're right, my lad. Why, look how the beams hit the table there where he works. Why, that's a good omen. [*Then at the table, and it might be a shrine at which she stood*] Look, the sunlight's all about the play he's writing.

Baron

[*Untouched by the beauty of her elation.*]

I hope there's a fine fat part for me.

La Forest

[*Proudly.*]

I'm to hear it this morning.

Baron

You, his cook?

La Forest

Yes, I, his cook. I hear what he's written even before the King of France.

Baron

[*With a wry grimace, touching his forehead.*]

There's a little bit wrong with the wisest.

La Forest

And often he'll change the parts that don't suit me.

Baron

And if he doesn't, I suppose you'll put poison in his broth? Is it that, or tell me in confidence, does he love you?

La Forest

I've been with him twenty years [*And her voice is quivering a little*] and it's I do the loving. Twenty years and now I know there's something eating his heart.

Baron

You mean the talk about Madame Armande?

La Forest

[*Swiftly.*]

There's nothing to that.

Baron

Think so, my friend? Ah, what a fool is the great Molière! I do not think he will like his crown of horns; but love sees all and love sees nothing.

La Forest

What do you know of love?

Baron

I'm only seventeen but I've had four affairs to my credit, with one to discredit the other four, for she was old enough to be the aunt of my mother's aunt. What a mess of kissing is life, La Forest!

La Forest

If there be any truth in this talk about Madame, his wife, God knows what will happen. No one has ever loved as he.

Baron

Old lady, I see you're determined to be unhappy and now I'll give you some cause.

La Forest

What?

Baron

Something else, my dearie.

La Forest

What, for the grace of God! Has there been trouble with the King?

Baron

Something that in the end is more mighty than that. Come closer and I'll whisper to you.

La Forest

What is it?

Baron

[*Very seriously.*]

I'm thinking of leaving the troupe of Molière.

La Forest

So?

Baron

Do you think he'll be able to survive it?

La Forest

Go, and good riddance to you. What were you, you imp of the gutter, when he took you in and made you a member of the troupe of Molière?

Baron

[*Strutting about.*]

There's a shift in fashions. The Court's gone classical again. Molière is getting old fashioned. I'm signing with the company at the Bourgogne.

La Forest

You're jesting, my little Baron.

Baron

No, it's true.

La Forest

He has been your friend. It will hurt him to the quick.

Baron

See that Madame, his wife, hurts him less.

La Forest

All that about his wife's a lie, I tell you.

Baron

Wait and see. Each for himself in this world and the devil for those who aren't. Why, there's not one in all the troupe but knows. Even Colinge, who plays the fools and is one, is wiser than Molière when it comes to Madame Armande.

La Forest

If you weren't such a child I'd beat you.

Baron

Beat, as you will, but the truth abides.

La Forest

You filthy little thing you!

[*She is about to strike him.*]

Baron

Look out, old lady, Christ will never forgive you if you hurt a genius.

[*He has run around the table,* La Forest *after him as* Armande *enters. She is but little past twenty, fresh and exquisite, impetuous, wilful and passionate, but in the depths of her nature, as yet unstable and unformed, are hidden possibilities of deep tenderness and an acute sensibility to pain.*]

Baron

[*As* La Forest *is very close to him.*]
Look out! Look out!

Armande

You're still here, Baron. What's the matter? Why the noise?

Baron

[*Breathless.*]
We're in hot dispute, this tender thing and I, about the classics. She's hectic for Homer whilst I [*he's gasping*], I'm middling warm for Vergil.

La Forest

[*Her arm lifted.*]
You, you!

BARON

What's your opinion, Madame?

ARMANDE

My opinion is that you'd best go before my husband's back. He'll want quiet for his work.

LA FOREST

[*To* BARON.]

Yes, get out. Madame, the master is to read to me this morning.

ARMANDE

Maybe not this morning, La Forest.

LA FOREST

Ah, yes, indeed, Madame. That's never changed. It's Wednesday and for twenty years he's always read to me on Wednesdays. He wouldn't give it up even if the King were coming.

ARMANDE

He is.

BARON

[*In amazement.*]

What?

LA FOREST

He is, Madame?

Armande

The priests are up in arms against Jean's play, "Tartuffe."

La Forest

[*In a temper.*]

The devil damn them all. Why, it's so funny one dies laughing but to hear it.

Armande

The priests find libel in it and so His Majesty's coming to hear some scenes this morning and to decide whether or no he'll grant us right to play it.

La Forest

Leave that to Molière, Madame; there's nothing in the world he cannot do.

Baron

Nothing, save one.

Armande

What's that, my little Baron?

Baron

Keep for himself what isn't his. Madame, you understand me.

Armande

[*Resenting the imputation in his tone.*]

That's very cryptic.

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Baron

Search in your heart and see if you can't find the key. And now good-day to you for I haven't eaten since five this morning.

[*And he exits.*]

Armande

I do not like Baron.

La Forest

The love that's lost between you wouldn't make straw for a swallow's nest.

Armande

What do you think he meant, La Forest?

La Forest

Madame, I do not know.

Armande

Yes, you do. What, what? He is jealous of my success, isn't he?

La Forest

Perhaps.

Armande

Jean must be rid of him.

La Forest

That will be easy for he's going.

Armande

Going? Is he the first rat to leave the ship? There are rumours, La Forest.

La Forest

[*Pointedly.*]

Yes, of all sorts, Madame. Is there a cause?

Armande

What do you mean?

La Forest

Rumours of what?

Armande

That the troupe of Molière is losing favour. The church would crush him and there's talk that Jean grows too arrogant. Why, after the ballet on Saturday at Chambord the King's Mistress sent for Jean to hear his latest play. [La Forest *suddenly looks up.*] But he was too weary, La Forest, would you believe it, too weary to go.

La Forest

Was he, Madame?

Armande

Yes. Only a very foolish man could have been as weary as that. Think what her interest may mean to us.

La Forest

Madame, you were a little child and you do not remember but he was happier in the old days when we trouped from town to town and our thoughts were never bent on kings.

Armande

Those days are over. Now he is in and being in must stay.

La Forest

Monsieur La Fontaine says that the Master wastes his genius on these ballets that he's for ever writing for the King.

Armande

No chance should be forfeited at Court. In a few months our place may be less secure than now. Lulli is plotting against Molière. Jean must bend before his Majesty for there's a saying, La Forest, that a King's favour is a ladder that trembles when one would climb.

La Forest

[*Hot with sudden honesty.*]

Would to God it might fall, Madame; can't you see what is happening? He is ill. Urge him to give up this endless work. The doctors have warned him. Go with him to Auteuil. It is quiet there out in the open. I've not been with him all

these years for nothing. I know that unless you go—

Armande

In a month, La Forest, there will be time. You do not understand me, even you who have been my nurse. I am not doing this for myself but for Jean.

La Forest

Madame, you are a member of the troupe of Molière.

Armande

[*Bitterly.*]

The troupe of Molière. Yes, from the beginning. I was born in the lap of the troupe of Molière. All I can remember is this life of the theatre. Don't you imagine that there are days when I would rush for ever from the grey sameness of it all? Have you never thought that I,—I, want to be something besides the wife of a genius, the puppet of his endless imaginings? The troupe of Molière [*and her voice is vibrant*], God, would that I were done with it.

La Forest

Madame, Madame!

Armande

No sooner are we back from the Palace than I'm hungry for the luxury of it all, for mornings that

do not mean rehearsals and for days that do not mean the endless study of his endless parts.

La Forest

Madame, your husband is the greatest man in France.

Armande

Is it because of that that you think I'm the happiest wife in Europe?

La Forest

I have watched you ever since your childhood. I have seen little by little this fame come to you, to him. Madame, I think it has come but to crowd out peace.

Armande

Ah, I want to make an end of it. It's all so full that it is empty. It is he that will not give it up, he. You do not know your master as I know him. I am very young, La Forest, but there come moments when I am as old as an agèd woman who has never known joy, whose heart is crying out for the happiness that she has never known.

La Forest

Back in the peace of Auteuil you will both find rest.

Armande

No, I am too young for silence. It will be terri-

ble being alone with him. I'm weary of being the shadow of another even though that other be Molière.

La Forest

Madame, no good can come of this. We must make the best of what fate has made us.

Armande

[*And her voice stings.*]

Because you believe that, you are still a servant.

La Forest

[*Quietly.*]

It is because I believe that that God has given me my happiness.

Armande

[*She is sobbing.*]

Happiness; yes, that is the right of each of us and I shall find my own.

La Forest

[*Pleading.*]

Madame, madame, not at the price of wounding him.

Armande

There are moments when no price is too high to pay.

LA FOREST

Madame, be careful; I hear him coming.

[*And* MOLIÈRE *stands in the room. He is one of those extraordinary men that one feels as a "presence." He must be played at times with quiet power and at times with all the glamour and colour of romance. One must feel behind his every gesture the flash of his commanding mind. He must personify by multitudinous nuances the comedy, if not the tragedy, of such a mind's slavery to an over-sensitive and ever-present introspection. Under the superficial, fascinating charm of his actor's manner must be felt the dominant power of his vitally experienced and mellowed personality. His soul is of the sort that can think in intense clarity of human generalities and at the same moment feel to a degree of tragic poignancy, a sorrow or a happiness when he himself is touched. His intense energy, always spent at high pitch, hangs poised half way between an almost blind adoration of his wife and an unflagging enthusiasm for his work as actor and as dramatist.*]

MOLIÈRE

Armande, you're early up.

Armande

I've come to rehearse with Le Grange. The others are there too, on the stage, waiting to play the scenes for the King.

Molière

And you, La Forest, are you here to sing a ballad for His Majesty?

La Forest

[*In an offended tone.*]
Have you forgotten that it's Wednesday?

Molière

Why, so it is. The play is ready. [*And he points to the table.*] But first take away these hampers and these bottles. [La Forest *begins collecting them.*] I do not like a room after a feast. It's like a theatre when the play is over. Something that has been is dead. Quick, La Forest; I will call you when I am ready.

La Forest

[*Scolding.*]
See that you're not too long about it.

Molière

[*Smiling.*]
Oh, look here, don't scold.

LA FOREST

You're sitting up too late.

MOLIÈRE

I promise to reform.

LA FOREST

When?

MOLIÈRE

Tomorrow.

LA FOREST

Tomorrow is the paradise of fools.

MOLIÈRE

Right, right, my friend! It's the moment's faith that matters. For the past has sung itself to sleep and the future is life's gamble. Now, look here, La Forest, you can't carry all those at once.

[*For the old woman is bent under the weight of the hampers.*]

LA FOREST

Didn't you say to hurry? No, I can manage these alone.

[*And she totters out.*]

MOLIÈRE

God bless her, I think she could sweep out hell in seven days.

ARMANDE

Sometimes her tongue is too free.

MOLIÈRE

Let her go babbling to the end, Armande,—her heart is right. And now, good morning, Armande.

[*And he holds out his arms to her.*]

ARMANDE

So, I've forgotten.

[*And then she is over next to him and kisses him as a child might kiss its father.*]

MOLIÈRE

You are tired. We supped too late last night.

ARMANDE

No. La Fontaine was never more amusing and Chapelle too. He finished all the bottles.

[*She turns to go.*]

MOLIÈRE

Armande.

ARMANDE

What is it, Jean?

MOLIÈRE

Why are you in such a haste to go?

ARMANDE

I told you Le Grange is waiting.

MOLIÈRE

[*And his voice is stern.*]
And so am I.

ARMANDE

For what? For what?

MOLIÈRE

There's a quality in me that's rare in dramatists.

ARMANDE

[*With just a tinge of irony.*]
Well, I'll sit down if it's to be a dissertation.

MOLIÈRE

No, for brevity will spare you that. Perhaps you've noticed that in my plays I hasten to essentials.

ARMANDE

[*Smiling.*]
Yes, Jean, I've played in many.

MOLIÈRE

[*Stepping closer to her.*]
And so in life too. Armande, what has come between us?

ARMANDE

I do not understand.

MOLIÈRE

Nor I. For days, for months I've been watching you. Fancies, I thought, perhaps of my too eager love. And then on Saturday at Chambord hints and almost certitudes, and now on all sides whispers of what my heart is trembling to believe.

ARMANDE

What, Jean, what?

[*And she is looking straight at him.*]

MOLIÈRE

Nothing, nothing; you're right. What should there be?

ARMANDE

Now may I go? The lines are difficult. Le Grange is waiting.

MOLIÈRE

Yes.

[*She turns from him, then as she reaches the door that leads to the stage.*]

MOLIÈRE

Armande!

ARMANDE

[*Turning.*]

Yes?

MOLIÈRE

Is there something you would spare me by your silence?

ARMANDE

No.

MOLIÈRE

Then I've misjudged you.

ARMANDE

You best had save these subtle fancies for your comedies.

MOLIÈRE

Last night your songs were over-shrill, your laughter over-gay. It has been like this since Chambord. When I look at you, Armande, you turn from me. [*And then almost fiercely.*] If there is some one who has intrigued your heart, for the love of God, tell me, Armande, tell me.

ARMANDE

No one. No one.

MOLIÈRE

Armande.

ARMANDE

You know I love you, Jean.

MOLIÈRE

I do, and that is why I speak freely to you all, that else a doubt would make me hesitate to say.

ARMANDE

There is nothing, nothing.

MOLIÈRE

Armande, do not think I do not understand. Yes, I am older than you, but still I know the terrible swiftness of the will of youth when it desires. Do you know that they are whispering, they are hinting [*and his voice is almost inaudible*], hinting —that, De Lauzun—

ARMANDE

[*Starting back.*]
What!

MOLIÈRE

When Lulli speaks of him his lips sneer.

ARMANDE

Lulli is your enemy and you still believe him.

MOLIÈRE

That is not all. When I passed with you under the trees at Chambord I heard the courtiers laughing. You are the wife of an actor, Armande; you are an actress, and to their filthy minds that means that you are easily taken and that I, I, Molière, should hide my head in silence and bend before the honour of their choice. Is no woman safe at Court?

ARMANDE

None, except de Montespan.

MOLIÈRE

You're right. Where's honour in a court where she is honoured?

ARMANDE

Be careful lest some one hear you.

MOLIÈRE

Oh, don't be frightened; the King's not coming yet.

ARMANDE

She has been kind, Jean, to me, to you.

MOLIÈRE

To what purpose? We are but actors.

ARMANDE

[*Holding out a little fan.*]

As a sign of her favour she sent this fan to me. She would help us.

MOLIÈRE

Help? Do we then need help? Am I not Molière?

ARMANDE

La Valliere has fallen, Jean. De Montespan is

nearest to the King. When she speaks it is France that listens. Remember the rival company at the Bourgogne. Some day we may need her.

Molière

Need her. You too, Armande. Is the taint so easily taken then? Let my work speak for me and not the favour of any woman even though she be the Mistress of the King. Armande, let me see that fan.

Armande

[*Drawing back for there is something in his tone that frightens her.*]

See how beautiful it is. She has written a motto on the panel. [*And then she reads.*] "She who flees her lover but flies to love." How beautiful it is!

Molière

[*Taking the fan and impetuously breaking it in his hand.*]

Armande

[*Her eyes filling with tears.*]

What have you done? What have you done?

Molière

Forgive me, forgive me. [*Then tenderly, his voice beseeching her.*] Armande, if I am cruel it is my love that makes me cruel. If ever you are

false to me, lie to me, lie to me, so that I may tell the world it lies. See now it's over, never again will I doubt you. Never. You still love me, Armande?

ARMANDE

As I have always loved you, Jean. See, your work awaits you. [*She is over, next to the table.*] Here at least there lurks no doubt, no bitterness. Don't, Jean, don't. It hurts me when you ask me to forgive you. Can't you understand? Don't. Don't. [*And then at the door.*] La Forest, your master is calling you.

[*And she exits to the stage and when* LA FOREST *enters* MOLIÈRE *is seated at his table.*]

MOLIÈRE

So, to work. [*He takes up a few sheets of the manuscript.*] Where were we last Wednesday?

LA FOREST

The scene where your hero goes blind with jealousy. What a fool he is for all his chatter.

MOLIÈRE

He's very like me, isn't he, La Forest?

LA FOREST

[*Bluntly.*]
Yes, Master.

Molière

[*Smiling.*]
You're frank, my ancient critic.

La Forest

You're both too honest, you and your hero, this Alceste. Truth goes shivering in a world where lies are raiment. Master, don't harken all you hear.

Molière

You're right. Well, sit down.

La Forest

[*After a pause.*]
Master, I know what's troubling you.

Molière

My comedy? Why, no, it's going well. Yes, here we are. [*And he begins reading.*] "Now Alceste rushes in with the letter in his hand."

La Forest

[*Interrupting him.*]
I think he would be more of a gentleman if he walked in slowly.

Molière

Perhaps you're right. Do you think I best had change it?

LA FOREST

[*Impatiently.*]

Why do you read to me if you don't intend to do as I say? You are a dramatist and you may know how to write plays but I am a cook and I know the public taste. I tell you to have him walk in.

MOLIÈRE

[*Smiling.*]

But why?

LA FOREST

What a fool you are with your questions. If he rushes in don't you know he may trip on his sword and then they will laugh where you don't want them to.

MOLIÈRE

Yes, there's something to that, but he doesn't have to have a sword.

LA FOREST

Then there's no fighting?

MOLIÈRE

No. We have changed all that.

LA FOREST

I always tell you it will be difficult to make your plays interesting if there isn't any fighting.

Molière

All of the fighting goes on in his doubts.

La Forest

So?

Molière

Don't you know that the greatest battles are fought in the heart of man?

La Forest

That sounds well enough to say but will it be worth listening to in the theatre?

Molière

That isn't in the play.

La Forest

Well, never mind if it is or isn't. Don't you know that all the great plays are about war and death?

Molière

[*Laughing.*]

They used to be but now Molière is in the field.

La Forest

You think very well of yourself, don't you, Monsieur?

Molière

And you, La Forest, what do you think of me?

LA FOREST

I'll tell you when the play is written.

[*At this moment* COLINGE *enters. He is an old man who has been from the beginning a member of* MOLIÈRE'S *troupe,—a poor old played-out actor pathetically conscious that the end of his career is upon him. His adoration for* MOLIÈRE *is that of a faithful old dog for its master.*]

COLINGE

Master, may I speak with you?

LA FOREST

Get out, Colinge. Can't you see that he's reading to me?

COLINGE

Oh, I'd forgotten it was Wednesday.

LA FOREST

This time we'll both forgive you.

[*He turns to go.*]

MOLIÈRE

Colinge, what is it?

COLINGE

Master, can you spare a moment only?

Molière

Of course, come in.

La Forest

[*Resenting this.*]

What!

Molière

Now look here, La Forest, just because you are my critic you needn't think you own me bones and body.

La Forest

[*Angry.*]

So! You're going to let him interrupt your play so that you two cronies can sit and gab. Women have the name for chatter, but we are hard put to it to beat you men at gossip.

Molière

Colinge, sit down.

La Forest

Well, sit down; can't you hear, Colinge?

Molière

La Forest, I'll call you when I'm ready.

La Forest

See that you are not too long about it or I'll not listen to your stupid old comedy at all.

[*She exits.*]

MOLIÈRE

Well, Colinge, what is it?

COLINGE

Master—I—I—

MOLIÈRE

Yes?

COLINGE

[*Hesitantly.*]

Monday at rehearsal when I forgot my lines you didn't seem to notice it and yesterday when I couldn't get the words you passed it over tho the company sat snickering in the corner.

MOLIÈRE

I've written so many lines that I think the world can spare a few.

[*And he scratches out several on the page before him.*]

COLINGE

Master, that was at rehearsal; what—what—[*and he is almost afraid to say it*]—what if I should forget some day during a performance?

MOLIÈRE

They'll bless you if you slice it. Most plays are twice as good when half as long.

COLINGE

That is true of Racine maybe, but not Molière. Master, what if all of the speeches should some day go from me? Last night I woke suddenly from a dream; the play had broken and the people jeered because Colinge could not go on.

MOLIÈRE

[*Kindly, sweetly.*]

Colinge, you were only dreaming. If that should happen they would never know. Just turn about and say: "'Twas Wednesday last" or "Sir, your ribbons are awry"—or this or that,—just say it deeply with your voice in some new register and they will think the play's beginning over.

COLINGE

[*And a sob begins in his voice.*]

It's the first time it's happened in all the years I've played with you.

MOLIÈRE

[*His arm about him.*]

It's about time you showed some temperament. The actor who is always perfect is no perfect actor.

COLINGE

[*Half tears, half laughter.*]

Master, you jest to spare me.

MOLIÈRE

I did not think my jests spared any one.

COLINGE

Don't hesitate to speak. I'd rather that you'd say it, sir, and it were over.

MOLIÈRE

What, Colinge?

COLINGE

What I dread to hear but when the day comes I suppose each of us must be ready. Say it, master [*his voice is faltering*]; say that I am too old, say that the troupe of Molière has no longer any use for me.

MOLIÈRE

Colinge!

COLINGE

Your comedies are too neatly written for my stumbling head. It's time for me to take my curtain.

MOLIÈRE

My friend, for twenty seasons you have played with me and now because you miss a rhyme or two you think your use is over. Colinge, where would I find another whose art's so mellow and so tested by the years? Where would I find another whose

listening is so eloquent as yours, whose humour is so rich yet never vulgar in its over ripeness? Colinge, what would the troupe of Molière do without you?

COLINGE

Master—

MOLIÈRE

[*For the old man's voice is next to tears.*]

Or have you perhaps had an offer from the company at the Bourgogne? Is it thus you want to break the news to me? Well, God speed to you, my friend, and never forget the tricks that Molière taught you.

COLINGE

Master, I never want to leave you.

MOLIÈRE

Well, don't whilst you are happy with me. You'll play a doctor in a comedy I plan to write, a comedy about a man who thinks that he's an invalid. We're all fools to our thoughts, Colinge. My hero is to think he's dying of all the ailments in the index, my friend Colinge believes his playing days are done and I, Molière, think that perhaps my wife—ah, well, at times this Molière thinks too much. But now to work.

[*He is back at the table.*]

COLINGE

Wait and see, master; I will not slip tomorrow.

MOLIÈRE

Of course you won't.

COLINGE

Even if my new part is half your comedy I'll know each word of it.

MOLIÈRE

[*Laughing.*]

Well, hardly half. Leave me a bit. I'm playing in it too. Tell La Forest that I'm ready.

[*And* COLINGE *exits.*]

LA FOREST

[*Entering.*]

You've kept me waiting long enough.

MOLIÈRE

[*Half to himself.*]

Poor Colinge.

LA FOREST

What's the matter with him?

MOLIÈRE

Nightfall, La Forest, nightfall.

La Forest

Nightfall. Rubbish! Well, let's to work.

Molière

Yes, I'm ready; come sit down.
[*He takes up his manuscript.*]

La Forest

What do you call your play?

Molière

"The Misanthrope."

La Forest

What's that?

Molière

A man who thinks he alone is right.

La Forest

He's lonely, isn't he?

Molière

Yes, and bitter.

La Forest

How has he learnt this bitterness?

Molière

Through love and through the hurt of love.

LA FOREST

It is good to be old and done with love. One can only be happy when that happiness is over.

MOLIÈRE

Love is the last dream we awake from.

[*And as he speaks he takes from the table the broken bits of* ARMANDE'S *fan.*]

LA FOREST

[*Watching him.*]

Go on with your play.

MOLIÈRE

It will be finished in a few weeks now that the fêtes are over.

LA FOREST

Why don't you give up this acting for ever? You're rich, famous.

MOLIÈRE

[*Smiling.*]

Were you a comedian, La Forest—

LA FOREST

[*Interrupting him.*]

Monsieur, every morning I am on my knees thanking the good God that he has made me a human being and not an actor.

MOLIÈRE

Were you a comedian you would know that an actor must go on. Were you an actor you would realize that nothing is so transitory as the fame of a player. Today the beautiful applause of Paris is in our ears, the King has approved our comedy, and then for months we have to pay the guards to keep the crowds away from the theatre. And then tomorrow—and that tomorrow sometimes comes too swiftly—tomorrow we are, perhaps, forgotten and at some country fair, unlicensed, and in vain we spill our souls to the yawns of the yokels. That is why an actor believes so terribly, so ridiculously in the moment; any moment, La Forest, may be his last. Why, every day when I see you light the candles before the play, then I know that I shall never give it up. Sometimes I even think that I shall die acting.

[*There is a pause. Then the sound of a coach stopping in the street.*]

LA FOREST

The devil take the King if he's come to interrupt us.

ARMANDE

[*Entering from the stage.*]

Some of the coaches are coming, Jean. His Majesty will follow in a moment now.

MOLIÈRE

Are all the actors ready, La Forest? Tell me when the King is here.

[*He exits by the door leading to the stage.*]

LA FOREST

[*At the window.*]

The outriders are in yellow with ribbons of blue. Is it the King's coach, Madame?

ARMANDE

Ribbons of blue. [*And her voice is trembling.*] La Forest, open the little door beyond the passage.

[LA FOREST *exits. A pause. And then there is the sound of voices and the next second* DE LAUZUN *is in the room. He is young, debonair, extraordinarily handsome and in the grace and ease of his manner, a perfect courtier.*]

ARMANDE

How often must I beseech you not to come to the theatre?

DE LAUZUN

Bidding me stay away but draws me nearer. I have chosen this chance of the King's coming, just to see you, speak to you.

ARMANDE

God! You are torturing me.

De Lauzun

And you? What do you do to me?

[*He steps nearer to her, holding out his arms.*]

Armande

Don't, don't. Do not come here. I am afraid. Go! Go!

De Lauzun

Shall I, Armande? As you bid me—

[*He has taken a step toward the door.*]

Armande

No,—stay a moment. What shall I do? What shall I do?

De Lauzun

I have told you. At Court all will be different. My mother's influence—she is lady-in-waiting to the Queen. A word from me—you understand. I love you but whilst you are here I can do nothing.

Armande

[*Bitterly.*]

Whilst I am here.

De Lauzun

When? Where shall we meet?

Armande

I am for ever watched.

De Lauzun

Where?

Armande

I do not know. Sometimes I'm afraid. When he looks at me I know that I would rather die than hurt him and then come the long hours when my heart cries out for you.

De Lauzun

Armande!

[*He has taken her into his arms.*]

Armande

God! God!

De Lauzun

Near the Palace at Fontainebleau is my father's hunting lodge. There's no living being about but the old man who keeps the dogs. It's so quiet there in the twilight, Armande, so very quiet.

Armande

I tell you I am for ever watched. I cannot get away from Paris.

De Lauzun

Then in the city here I'll meet you at the milliner's.

Armande

He goes with me. There is no detail of the costumes too small for his attention.

De Lauzun

At the shops on the Bridge.

Armande

Perhaps. I do not know. When you are away I would be with you. Then my heart bids me slam the door of his theatre for ever and be gone. But then I look up—and his eyes are upon me. Oh, God, what has Fate done to me?

[*She sinks into a chair at the table.*]

De Lauzun

You do not love me, Armande?

Armande

Yes, I want to go with you, but something—something—

De Lauzun

We men are braver.

Armande

It isn't fear but something I do not understand.

De Lauzun

This afternoon, after the play, my coach will be waiting beyond the bridge.

ARMANDE

No, I cannot.

DE LAUZUN

You do not love me.

ARMANDE

Beyond the bridge. Some day perhaps, but—no—no. [*The sound of more coaches stopping in the street. She is at the window.*] It's the King.

LA FOREST

[*Rushing in.*]
Madame, the King, the King!

ARMANDE

Yes. Go tell your Master.

LA FOREST

[*At the door, calling into the stage.*]
Master. The King, the King!

ARMANDE

[*Low to* DE LAUZUN.]
Pity me, pity me.

[*At this moment* MOLIÈRE *stands on the threshold, his eyes glancing from* DE LAUZUN *to* ARMANDE. *He is about to speak, the blood mounting in his face.* LA FOREST *stands*

watching him. His hand, lifted to his heart, is trembling.]

MOLIÈRE

[*Very low.*]

Armande.

[*There is a pause. Then suddenly the sound of voices in the passage way.*]

LA FOREST

Master, the King.

MOLIÈRE

[*Suddenly straightening up.*]

Yes, I am ready.

[*One or two courtiers enter. And then the voice of the chamberlain is heard calling.*]

The King! The King!

[MOLIÈRE, ARMANDE, *the* COURTIERS *and* LA FOREST *all bow facing the door and* LOUIS OF FRANCE *enters and on his arm is leaning* FRANÇOISE DE MONTESPAN. *The* KING *is pompous, self-indulgent and inordinately conceited. He has learnt through dire necessity to cover his stupidity under royal irritability. Even in spite of this he has a certain personal charm, but though he has had two mistresses to his credit and several others not historically recorded, it is more to the fact that he is King*

than an irresistible gentleman that his favour with the ladies has been so regally extensive.

MADAME DE MONTESPAN, *to quote* BARON *and the superlative* SAINT-SIMON, *is as beautiful as the day. She is imperious and at the same time fascinating, quick, humorous and witty. She is never for a moment off her guard, always alert with the sensitive alertness of an astute woman whose life has been a perpetual campaign for power and who has learned that most subtle of the lessons of femininity: the ability to anticipate another's mental mood.*]

Following the KING *are one or two more Courtiers,* DE MONTESPAN'S *ladies and* LA FONTAINE, *the writer of the Fables. He is a quaint, eccentric man, a mixture of the direct and the aloof, a man whose speech is coloured by a peculiar attractive quality of absent-mindedness.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Approaching and kneeling to the* KING.] Sire, you're welcome. The actors are waiting to play the scenes that the Reverend Fathers of God find libelous.

LOUIS

So, how long do the scenes last?

Molière

Only the length of your amusement, Sire.

Louis

Some day I shall issue a royal edict so limiting all plays.

La Fontaine

[*Dryly.*]

That would close nearly every theatre in Paris, Your Majesty.

Louis

[*Patly.*]

No, sir, all in France, but at the moment I except Molière. He is an excellent fellow.

Molière

Your Majesty, that is because I have not yet learned how easily you are bored.

Louis

Exactly. Why do the Abbés object to your comedy?

Molière

Perhaps because it tells the truth.

Louis

What's its theme, Sir?

MOLIÈRE

[*His eye on* ARMANDE *who stands at one side close to* DE LAUZUN.]

It's called "Tartuffe," Your Majesty, and it's about a hypocrite.

LOUIS

The theme's a pregnant one. You play in it, Molière?

MOLIÈRE

Today, Sire, only a small part.

LOUIS

It takes a big man to play the little parts. Where's your make-up?

MOLIÈRE

In my art.

LOUIS

Well answered. Can you teach me to speak so patly?

MOLIÈRE

In one lesson, Sire, provided only—

LOUIS

What?

MOLIÈRE

That you were Molière.

Louis

[*Enjoying the answer tho the point's against him.*]

La Fontaine, make a note of that.

La Fontaine

[*Smiling slyly.*]

I've already done so, your Majesty.

Louis

And tell these things to the Queen; they may amuse her. She must be amused, otherwise having nothing to do she is apt to come to my apartments on the pretext of inquiring how I feel. I'm in excellent health. Have a bulletin sent out each morning, until Lent, saying I'm in excellent health.

Mme. de Montespan

God so preserve you, Sire.

Louis

Françoise, thanks for your prayers. [*Then to* Armande.] Good morning, Madame. At Chambord you were a delight to the eye and a ravishment to the ear. You must come some time and play for the Queen, only play something that's religious. Molière, you will write something sacred for Her Majesty.

MOLIÈRE

[*Bowing.*]

In all things it will be my privilege to please you, Sire.

LOUIS

Good. Full of Saints, Molière. A play quite stuffed with saints, lest Her Majesty misunderstand it.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Too much holiness may crowd out art.

MOLIÈRE

And too much art, the holy.

LOUIS

That's good, Molière. La Fontaine, make a note of that.

LA FONTAINE

Yes, Your Majesty.

LOUIS

[*Magnificently.*]

Molière, you have a way of saying exactly what I'm thinking. Some day I must act in one of your plays. I'm a very excellent actor.

MOLIÈRE

Not so good as I, Sire.

Louis

Why not?

Molière

Sire, I can play the King of France, but can you play Molière?

Louis

Write a scene for this lady and myself. [*He points to* de Montespan.] Something pastoral and quieting.

Mme. de Montespan

[*With a suggestive delicacy.*]

What, Louis? Did you say *quieting?*

La Fontaine

[*His voice half winking.*]

Why not, Madame? You're both most excellent actors.

Louis

Exactly. And follow it with an interlude of shepherds for the ballet. I'm an expert dancer too. And then another scene tender and peaceful for the lady and myself, under a sycamore. Some twenty pages, say.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Laughing.*]

Not too long in the preamble, Molière. [*And*

then slower, more warmly than she knows.] Let us soon come to the loving.

MOLIÈRE

A love too swiftly given is a love too swiftly done. Sire, the actors await your coming.

[*He stands aside to make way for the* KING *to pass into the theatre.*

I hope you will approve of our scenes.

LOUIS

I do not know. A play is like a woman. One never knows if it is good or not until it is over.

[*And the* KING *exits, followed by* MOLIÈRE *and others. At the door* MME. DE MONTESPAN *stops* ARMANDE.]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You are in the scenes, Madame?

ARMANDE

No, Madame, not these.

[*She steps nearer to the door.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

A word with you, Madame. Do not be disturbed. His Majesty will grant permission for the comedy. Molière has already won his heart and I have spoken in his favour. You both have greatly pleased us.

Armande

[*Bowing.*]

Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, at Chambord you were exquisite.

Armande

Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

I marvel at you.

Armande

It is an art which mellows with experience.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Quietly. Hardly looking at* Armande.] As for me I have never been able to seem what I am not, but I regret it. We are but tools in the hands of men, our masters, unless we have refuge in seeming what we are not. [*A pause.*] But, Madame, perhaps you have not suffered at the hands of love?

Armande

My life has been from the beginning very guarded. It is only when we are summoned to the fêtes at Court that I see other gentlemen besides the members of my husband's troupe. And they are for the most part very dull. Actors are very stupid, Madame; most of them without real feeling.

Mme. de Montespan

You players are for ever imagining the emotions of others. Is that why you have so few yourselves?

Armande

Perhaps, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

I have been watching you much, Madame. [*And* Armande *looks up at her.*] It is not alone your art that interests me.

Armande

No, Madame?

Mme. de Montespan

Your manners, too, are so graceful, so distinguished. For each part you play they are correct.

Armande

I have learned much from my husband, both as to manners and characterization. He has the faculty of watching people and of understanding their souls.

Mme. de Montespan

Always, Madame?

Armande

Yes, always.

Mme. de Montespan

Surely it is easier for a dramatist to know men than women? As for me I think I never know a person until I have seen them weep. It is when we are sad that the soul is off its guard.

[*And suddenly she looks at* Armande.]

Armande

Jean says it is when people laugh that they are most themselves.

Mme. de Montespan

Perhaps that is because he doesn't like to weep. Have you ever seen him weep, Madame?

Armande

No, Madame.

[*A pause.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Your dresses too, Madame, are exquisite.

Armande

They are of my own design. I have them made thus that the lines of the body should not be hidden.

Mme. de Montespan

You are an artist then.

Armande

Thank you, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

But—

[*And she has taken a step nearer to her and stands looking into her eyes.* Armande, *feeling the scrutiny, tries to turn away.*]

But—even the charm of your acting has not been able to hide what to the eye of a woman is as clear as this ring here on my finger. Men are such fools. They so often seek vain shadows in the midst of realities. It is a beautiful ring, is it not, my dear? Louis gave it to me the first time—ah, well. [*Then her voice takes on almost a note of command.*] Come closer to me, child.

Armande

Madame, with your permission.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Sweetly.*]

Yes, Madame, with my permission.

Armande

I have a long part at rehearsal tomorrow. I have left the lines below in my dressing-room.

Mme. de Montespan

[*The command is now tenderness.*]

Why do you turn away from me? I am Françoise de Montespan. Do you think I do not know the heart of a woman?

Armande

Madame, I—

Mme. de Montespan

No. Do not acknowledge, do not deny. Your great sad eyes have answered me. [*She has taken her hand.*] Your husband is not kind to you?

Armande

[*Confused, it is difficult to withstand the directness of her pity.*]

Too kind, too kind.

Mme. de Montespan

[*After a pause, her voice almost tremulous with sympathy.*]

These scorching shackles of gentleness are the most terrible tyranny of all. Come closer to me, Armande. You will permit me to call you Armande? Perhaps you will care to tell me when you know that I pity you.

Armande

Tell you what, Madame? What?

Mme. de Montespan

What you are saying clearly though you do not speak a word. Do you not want to tell me? Do you not want to tell any one? Do not answer me if you do not wish to. Shall we speak of something else?

[*Her hand is on the girl's shoulder.*]

ARMANDE

[*Suddenly.*]

Yes, yes, I want to shriek it out to all Paris—to all the world.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Her arm about her.*]

Softly, softly, my dear. Would it not be wiser to whisper it to a woman? [*And then very low.*] You do not love your husband?

ARMANDE

I—I— He has my respect, my admiration.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You are right. It is as I thought. I know, I know. One never loves what one respects. [*There are tears in her voice.*] My dear, my dear.

ARMANDE

[*And all that she had tried to suppress wells up.*]

In the midst of his love which stifles me, I am alone, alone!

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Stroking her hair.*]

You are a young, a beautiful woman; have you never thought a way out of this loneliness?

Armande

I see no one; I know no one.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Smiling.*]

Then the rumours of the attentions of the courtiers are but empty gossip.

Armande

Yes.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Slowly watching the effect of her words.*]

Then your husband doesn't really know that you love de Lauzun?

Armande

[*Springing back.*]

Why do you say that?

[*Her tone has told all.*]

Mme. de Montespan

So, my dear.

Armande

I have not seen him since Chambord.

Mme. de Montespan

No, madame? But we're in Paris now. I, too, have loved, madame. I have watched you. You should guard your voice,—your voice grows hot when he comes near you.

Armande

No one knows.

Mme. de Montespan

No one need know, my child.

[*She is still smiling.*]

Armande

Why do you look at me like that?

Mme. de Montespan

Your youth is too beautiful to be wasted, Madame. I do not think that God desires that. Come closer to me; I pity you. [*And again she holds out her arms to her.*] Only the ecstasy of requited love is a fitting offering to lay on the altar of the great wonder of life. Have you known that ecstasy? It is that which makes us very beautiful. It is that which makes us gods. Nature has not meant that that should be denied. Ah, madame, my heart bleeds for you.

Armande

[*She is weeping now.*]

What am I to do? I am for ever watched, for ever imprisoned in this bitter love of his.

Mme. de Montespan

[*For a second a strange look in her eye.*]

It is a great love, Madame; crowded into a moment it might set the world aflame.

ARMANDE

Too great, too great; what shall I do? When he is away I know I love de Lauzun. I love him; I love him. When he speaks to me it is my heart that listens. When he looks at me my soul goes out to meet him. This morning, Madame,—ah, what a fool I am,—I stood at the window watching the flight of the swallows,—because when they flew across the river I seemed to hear his laughter. And on the way back from Chambord I counted the mile posts, one by one—when we passed them my breath choked me; they seemed to be on fire. Each one brought me nearer to Paris and to him. I half hoped, half feared, he would find some excuse for coming to the theatre and now that he is come I am afraid. No man can understand this, Madame; what shall I do? What shall I do?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Under my apartment at the Palace there is a little garden. No one enters there save at my command. Be there a little before twilight this evening. I will tell de Lauzun. Shhh! They are coming back. No,—do not thank me. Say nothing. I am your friend. Go; do not stay to see de Lauzun. I have watched your husband watching you.

[*And* ARMANDE *exits and* DE MONTESPAN *is over at the table where she has thrown her*

gloves among some books, and stands with some pages of the manuscript of "The Misanthrope" in her hand when the KING, MOLIÈRE *and the others enter.*]

LOUIS

Françoise, you are not coming to hear the play?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

No, Louis; these pages have intrigued me more. I'll leave you to decide about the priests and hypocrites. You know how Bossuet bores me. But this I find closer to my liking.

LOUIS

What is it, Molière?

MOLIÈRE

My new comedy, "The Misanthrope." May it be an honour to you and to your reign, Your Majesty.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

It will. It's deeply felt. Molière, how have you imagined this?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, I am a dramatist.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

But this is life.

Molière

Your distinction breeds divorce. Must the two be separate?

La Fontaine

Not when Molière, the master, weds them with his art.

Louis

La Fontaine, you're too elaborate. What's the theme of this comedy? Perhaps I'll play in it.

Mme. de Montespan

Jealousy, Your Majesty, jealousy that feeds upon its own heart even tho the food be bitter.

Louis

I'll hear a page.

Molière

With pleasure, Sire, but what of the priests and my poor hypocrite in there?

[*He points towards the stage.*]

Louis

Later we'll hear the rest of that. But now a page of this since it so moves this lady here.

Molière

With your permission, Sire.

[*By this time the rest of the courtiers have*

entered from the stage and stand in the room. The KING *seats himself as* MOLIÈRE *takes the sheets from the table.*]

LOUIS

Choose at random, Molière. A speech or two so that we may taste the flavour of it.

MOLIÈRE

[*Reading.*]

"Everywhere I see nothing but base flattery, self-seeking, injustice and deceit. No, I can bear it all no longer and my intention is to break for ever with all mankind."

LOUIS

Yes, it's apparent there's a woman in it.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You're cruel, Louis.

LOUIS

Go on, Molière.

MOLIÈRE

Now Philinte speaks: "This philosophic moroseness is, I think, too fierce."

LA FONTAINE

[*His tongue in his cheek.*]

Yes, I agree with him.

LOUIS

By your leave, La Fontaine, this is a comedy and not a commentary.

[*And at this moment the door opens and* THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN *enters.*]

THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN

Sire.

LOUIS

Well, what is it?

THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN

Your pardon, Majesty, but word has just come from the Palace from your Minister Colbert that you have promised an audience to the ambassadors of Spain before noon today.

LOUIS

Does my Minister Colbert think that these Ambassadors are more important than the comedies of Molière?

THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN

Again, Your Majesty, pardon, but your Minister also desires me to tell Your Majesty that you've kept the Spanish Ambassadors waiting for more than a week.

LOUIS

[*Annoyed.*]

What shall I do, Molière?

Molière

Sire, out of respect for Madame, your wife, who is a Spaniard, I think you should see them before the month is up.

Louis

I do not relish these Ambassadors. I would hear more of your comedies. There are too many ambassadors, too many countries and too many kings. There should be only one king and he should blaze like the sun.

Molière

The sun of France, Sire.

Louis

Yes, and in the meantime as to your "Tartuffe" I've heard enough. Let the priests yelp. You actors, too, are God's instruments. Let not one instrument of God restrict the other. Come and play it at the Louvre. Your comedy will have the royal sanction.

Molière

Thanks, Your Majesty.

Mme. de Montespan

Louis, you have decided well.

Louis

Françoise, I always do. My favour is my praise.

La Fontaine

[*Pointing to* Molière.]
None has deserved it more than he.

Mme. de Montespan

He should be crowned with laurels.

Molière

Madame, such matters do but scratch the brain.

La Fontaine

He is the chief glory of your reign, Sire.

Louis

What's that? [*His pride has been tactlessly touched.*] Is my reign to be remembered for Molière or Molière for my reign?

Molière

I am but a ray of your refulgence, Sire.

Louis

See that no shadow ever dim the flame. And now we'll see these Ambassadors. Your comedies have put me in the proper mood.

[*He turns to go.*]

The King's Chamberlain

The King! Make way for His Majesty the King!

[*And then follows a scene of bustling cour-*

tesy attending the departure of the King. As DE LAUZUN *passes* MADAME DE MONTESPAN *she stops him.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Tonight in my garden, at twilight.

[*The courtiers are leaving; there is much bowing and formality but in the end* MOLIÈRE *is left alone and sits down to write.*]

LA FOREST

[*Quietly entering.*]
Shall we go on now, Master?

MOLIÈRE

No, not now. Where's Armande?

LA FOREST

In her dressing-room, studying her lines.

MOLIÈRE

Tell the actors they are free until this afternoon's rehearsal.

LA FOREST

All has gone well, Master?

MOLIÈRE

Yes, yes.

LA FOREST

God be praised. And I'll let no one in.

[*She goes about quietly closing the doors and exits to the stage to tell the actors they are dismissed.* MOLIÈRE *sits in the sunlight, thinking, his quill lifted, waiting for the moment of inspiration. He writes a word or two. A pause. He leans upon his arm. Then he is up pacing about the room, mumbling the speeches to himself. He has reached the door that leads to the stage and turns in amazement for standing in the passageway that leads from the street he sees* DE MONTESPAN.]

MOLIÈRE

Madame!

MME. DE MONTESPAN

A moment, Molière; pardon but I've left my glove there on your table.

[*And he brings it over to her and hands it to her with a bow.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

A word, Molière, before you bow too low. Do you not think that I am your friend?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, I hope so.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I will give you proof. Come to my apartments this evening if you would serve me.

MOLIÈRE

Madame, this evening—

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Do not say no, Molière, for once before I bade you come.

MOLIÈRE

[*A little hesitantly for there is something in her manner which he mistrusts.*]

If I can serve you, Madame.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You can and that will greatly please me for I thought, perhaps, your allegiance was only to the King.

MOLIÈRE

If I serve one who is dear to His Majesty, do I not also serve the King?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

That is well answered. [*Her tone is low, perhaps to hide a note of command.*] You will come?

MOLIÈRE

Yes, madame, I will come.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

A little after twilight, Molière. [*And now her words are even lower and in her voice there is the*

beginning of something half hope, half passion.] Remember, a little after twilight.

[*And she is gone and he stands looking after her, an expression of misgiving in his eyes as the curtain falls.*]

ACT II

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT II ARE

MADAME DE MONTESPAN.
LA FONTAINE.
GIOVANNI LULLI, *the Court Musician.*
HERCULES, *a black boy, Page to Madame de Montespan.*
THE KING
MOLIÈRE
and two Ladies-in-Waiting to de Montespan,

The scene is the Apartments of MADAME DE MONTESPAN.

The time of the action of Act II is twilight of the same day as Act I.

ACT II

The apartment of MADAME DE MONTESPAN, *a room in the most exquisite style of the period of Louis XIV. In an alcove is a low bed, the frame of which is made of embossed silver. On the other side of the room is a tall window which looks below into the court or tiny private garden of the* KING'S *Mistress. Opposite the window is a small door in a panel in the wall.*

MADAME DE MONTESPAN *is at her mirror. One of her ladies is bending over arranging* DE MONTESPAN'S *hair. Another stands a little to one side, a bottle of perfume in her hand. On the toilet table are various trinkets, among them a tiny watch, and near by in a golden vase are some deep purple Iris flowers. At* DE MONTESPAN'S *feet on a cushion sits* HERCULES, *her little blackamoor, with a tremendous jewelled turban on his head. On one side of the room is* LULLI *seated at a harpsichord and on the other is* LA FONTAINE, *a book in hand. The two men are alternately reading and playing to the Mistress of the King as she makes her*

toilet. La Fontaine *is more absent-minded than usual and has stopped in the middle of a fable he is improvising and is unable to go on.*

Mme. de Montespan

Well, what happens; how does the fable end?

La Fontaine

I have forgotten, Madame. [*Attempting to recall the story.*] Dear me, what was it about? Well, never mind; I will begin another.

Mme. de Montespan

If it is not too long perhaps you will remember this one.

La Fontaine

Let me see. Let me see. [*He sits for a moment in thought.*] Yes, yes. [*And he begins his story.*] "The Dove and the Ant"—

Mme. de Montespan

Is it short?

La Fontaine

No longer than Hercules. [*He bends over and taps the boy on the head.*] Black Boy, do you want to hear my fable?

Hercules

Wait until I have eaten my chocolate. [*And*

taking one from a gilded box in a cushion next to him he gulps it down.] Now begin.

[LA FONTAINE *sits thinking what the tale is about. A pause.* LULLI *strums a few bars on the harpsichord.*]

[*To* LULLI.]

Be still or I will throw my candies at you.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*To* LULLI.]

We'll have the tale without accompaniment, Giovanni. [*The Ladies laugh. Then to* LA FONTAINE.] Go on.

LA FONTAINE

My fable is about some very little animals.

HERCULES

Smaller than the King's dog?

LA FONTAINE

Yes, for one of them is an ant, and the other is a dove. Now I will begin. [*And they all sit listening.*] At the side of a brook a dove is drinking when, lo, an ant tumbles into the water.

HERCULES

Does the ant get drowned?

Mme. de Montespan

Be still, Hercules; how would the tale go on if the hero is drowned at the very beginning?

La Fontaine

My lad, wait and listen. Be more patient. Humanity is less patient than the unthinking beasts. Where was I? [*A pause.*] Oh, yes. [*And then he goes on with his fable.*] Even now the ant is struggling to reach the shore but all in vain, for to him the tiny brook seems vaster than the sea.

Hercules

Go on. Go on.

La Fontaine

[*With lifted finger.*]
But the dove is kind.

Mme. de Montespan

Why not, for the dove is love's symbol and love is kind. [*Then to one of the ladies.*] Do the lackeys know to have Monsieur Molière wait in the little room beyond the corridor?

The First Lady

Madame, we have so told them.

La Fontaine

[*Continuing.*]

And so the dove with quick charity throws a leaf into the stream and the ant climbs on the leaf and thus is saved.

Hercules

[*Looking up from his candies.*]

And is that all?

Mme. de Montespan

When you are older, my black boy, you will know that life saves us from one danger but to lead us to another.

[*Then to one of the ladies.*]

See if Molière is not waiting in the ante-room.

[The First Lady *goes out.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Feeling* Lulli's *eyes upon her.*]

But we have forgotten your story, my fable tree.

Lulli

[*Impatiently.*]

Madame, I have composed a minuet for you. Shall I play it?

Mme. de Montespan

No, not now. [*Then to* La Fontaine.] What of the dove?

La Fontaine

The dove's in danger.

Hercules

[*Looking up.*]

Yes?

La Fontaine

For a peasant with bare feet passes and in his hand is a bow and when he sees the dove he lifts his bow to kill it.

Hercules

I don't want him to kill it. I don't want him to kill it. Doves are white. Mme. de Montespan says her throat is as white as a dove's. If he kills the dove I will tell the King.

Mme. de Montespan

Stop your chatter. [*Then to* La Fontaine.] Well, what happens?

La Fontaine

Just a minute, Madame; just a minute, there! I'm afraid I've quite forgotten.

Hercules

If you don't know I will ask Molière.

Lulli

What?

Hercules

[*Pointing to* de Montespan.]

Madame Françoise says there is nothing that Molière doesn't know.

[*He begins eating another chocolate.*]

La Fontaine

[*Who has been thinking of the end of his story.*]

Ah! Now I know the end.

Mme. de Montespan

Well, go on.

La Fontaine

Let me see— Come over to me, Hercules, and you shall hear the end of my fable.

[*The boy goes over to him.*]

La Fontaine

[*Taking his hand.*]

As the man is about to shoot the dove the ant stings him in the heel and as he turns his head the dove is gone, thus his supper flies away and there isn't a penny's worth of pigeon left.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Clapping her hands.*]

Bravo! Bravo! You're improving, my fable tree. You have remembered all of it.

La Fontaine

I am well pleased myself, Madame, that I've remembered all. Alas, I forget everything. I haven't seen my wife for years. The only way we could stay together was by living apart. I do not even recall what she looks like. [*Then with a sigh.*] In life sometimes it is good to forget but not in fables. That is why I make my fables so short lest I forget how they started. Indeed, Madame, some day I am afraid that on a gay dog I will tie a sad tale or make the weeping willows laugh.

[The First Lady *returns.*]

The First Lady

Madame, no one is waiting in the ante-room.

Mme. de Montespan

Not yet, not yet?

La Fontaine

Will you hear another fable?

Hercules

[*Decidedly.*]

No, sir, for you take too long to tell them, nor are you so great a writer as the montebank, Molière. So says my lady de Montespan. Will you take me some day, Madame, if there is room in your great

coach for the King, besides yourself and me, to see this animal man's menagerie?

La Fontaine

You will have to be tinier than you are, my ebony boy.

Hercules

[*Not to be thwarted.*]
I will go; I will go. Why must I be tinier?

La Fontaine

[*Pointing to his head and with his voice smilingly poised in whimsy.*]
To enter here for all these great and little beasts live in the minutest chambers of my brain.

Hercules

Madame, this fellow tires me. [*Then pointing to* Lulli.] Have your Giovanni play his minuet.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Touching her lips with a last bit of rouge.*]
Is there time for dancing before the twilight falls?

Lulli

Madame, there is always time for my minuet. I am Lulli, musician to the King.

Mme. de Montespan

So? [*Then less lightly to one of the ladies.*] Go to my window and see if any one is waiting below in my garden.

The Second Lady

[*At the window, looking out.*]

There is a woman waiting beneath the statue of Cupid.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Smiling.*]

She will not be there alone for very long. Now if there is still a moment before Molière comes we will have the music, my Giovanni.

Lulli

[*Angrily.*]

Can you not keep this actor waiting?

La Fontaine

Why so hot, Giovanni? Is there not room at court for all of us?

Lulli

[*His temper rising.*]

Not for Molière. When self-opinion grows too big it may burst its own too pompous head.

La Fontaine

Then you had best have your own wig tightened, my Italian.

Lulli

This actor is an upstart, the son of a tradesman.

La Fontaine

Sometimes the lowest bushes bear the reddest roses.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Looking up at him.*]
Yes, that is so, my fable tree.

Lulli

The son of an upholsterer. Bah!

La Fontaine

Remember your own beginning, my Giovanni. Is not a counter in a shop as soft a cradle as a scullery?

Lulli

That's a lie, La Fontaine.

La Fontaine

[*Dryly.*]
But we must all begin somewhere, I suppose, and of that, words avail us naught. Have you ever thought, Madame, that at birth we say nothing and

at death it matters little what we say though in the interim we may have filled the world with all the idle gossip of our days?

Lulli

I am something at Court. *I* am music master to the children of the King.

La Fontaine

And alas, Molière is too often player to the pleasure of the King. He wastes his genius on these trifles for the court.

Lulli

His genius goes too far, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

[*For there is something in his voice which arrests her.*]

What?

Lulli

He has insulted you.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Swiftly.*]

What's that?

Lulli

Do you not know that he has written a play in which he has had the temerity to satirize you,

Madame, and your husband and even His Majesty, the King?

La Fontaine

That's a lie.

Lulli

Boileau heard the comedy. He was telling me at Chambord. In this play, this actor, with his tongue in his cheek, has made sport of you, Madame.

La Fontaine

Madame, do not believe this.

Lulli

He even boasts that he will have it printed.

La Fontaine

That is not true. Molière is too loyal to the King.

Lulli

Is he?

Mme. de Montespan

More loyal to his King than you are to your friend, Giovanni. There is some mistake. The King must not hear of this.

Hercules

[*Jumping up.*]

I will tell him if you do not give me another box of sugar plums.

La Fontaine

So, my little courtier, you are learning early.

Lulli

[*Significantly.*]

If the King hears of this, the curtain falls for ever on Molière.

Mme. de Montespan

There is some mistake.

Lulli

Even this Molière can go too far.

La Fontaine

Do not believe until you know.

Mme. de Montespan

I don't.

[*She has gone over to the window and is looking out.*]

La Fontaine

[*Straight at* Lulli *and the words hit him in the face.*]

Maybe the desire breeds the lie.

[*A pause.*]

Lulli

What of my minuet, Madame?

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, we have forgotten,—play.

[Lulli *sits at the harpsichord and begins playing the first measures of his minuet.*]

Hercules

[*Going over to* de Montespan.]

I have been learning some new steps, Madame. [*And then he bows to her until his turban sweeps the floor.*] Will you do me the honour, Madame, will you dance with me?

Mme. de Montespan

[*To* La Fontaine.]

Will you dance, too, my fable tree?

La Fontaine

No, if he doesn't play too loudly I will doze.

Mme. de Montespan

[*To* Lulli.]

Begin again.

[*And she takes the hand of the child and they begin to dance a few measures. Then she breaks from him and rushes over to the window and as he plays* Lulli *watches her.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*At the window.*]

At last, at last. I thought the lady would not be

long alone. Play louder, Giovanni. [*She is back in the room, her voice aglow.*] Louder, louder. Come, Hercules, and we shall finish. [*Then as they dance.*] Where have you learned these pretty steps?

Hercules

[*Pirouetting.*]

I peeped thru the door when the children of the King were at their lesson. Point the right toe thus as you turn round.

[*And he shows her.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Some day with these tripping steps you may win a dusky lady's heart.

Hercules

Not with my toe's point but my sword's.

Mme. de Montespan

[*With a peal of laughter.*] You men are all so masterful.

[*They go on dancing a measure or two. Suddenly* Lulli *stops, for standing in the doorway of the alcove is the* King. *They all turn and bow to his Majesty.*]

Louis

[*Stepping into the room.*]

No, do not stop. I like to find France dancing.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Gaily.*]
And will you join us?

Louis

Not now. Tomorrow, maybe. Or if not tomorrow, then in a day or two, if you are still dancing when I am back.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Glancing towards the door.*]
You are leaving Paris, Louis?

Louis

Françoise, I thought I told you that this morning.

Mme. de Montespan

God forgive me, Louis, but I had quite forgotten.

Louis

Madame, it were best to remember the comings and the goings of a King. I leave for Fontainebleau in some few minutes now. I have come to say farewell.

Mme. de Montespan

[*To the others.*]
Pray leave us.
[*They are all bowing to the King.*]

Louis

[*To* La Fontaine.]

La Fontaine, will you join the hunt?

La Fontaine

Sire, with your permission I would not slay with my hand the animals that my art makes live.

[*He is bowing to the King.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Swiftly to her ladies.*]

Wait in the passage till I call you.

[Lulli *is watching them. The Ladies exit.*]

Louis

[*To* Lulli.]

And you, Lulli, do you wish to go along? The hunting's good at Fontainebleau.

Lulli

[*Glancing at* Mme. de Montespan.]

In Paris, too, Your Majesty.

Louis

[*For he has caught some hidden meaning in the tone.*]

What's that?

Lulli

Sire, we are all huntsmen, following the brush of your desire. Some gallop slow as I, some fast as this Molière of yours, but at the day's end of the chase we are all waiting for the prize of your fair favour. Alas, I cannot join you, Sire, for this evening I have promised Her Majesty a little concert of some sacred tunes.

Louis

Some day I fear Her Majesty, quite unawares, will drift straight up to God, on the wings of all this hymning. Too much incense chokes me. I've just seen the Queen. I always do on Wednesday. But she smelt so much of saints and paradise that for these last few minutes, Françoise, I'll spend the time with you.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Bowing.*]

Louis, not only these few moments, but all my life is yours. Lulli, La Fontaine—

[*She bows to them.*]

La Fontaine

[*At the door.*]

Was my fable finished?

Louis

If not, you may go on tomorrow.

La Fontaine

Sire, with the greatest of pleasure.

[*And he exits.*]

Lulli

[*Insinuatingly.*]

Some day, Madame, you will hear my minuet?

Louis

[*Now a little irritated.*]

Yes, but for the moment let us let music wait its own necessity.

[Lulli, *bowing, exits.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*To* Hercules.]

Well, Hercules, my little Argus, go now. [*And then pointing it beyond mistake.*] And see that the lackeys let no one enter.

[*The boy exits and she turns to face the King.*]

Louis

Françoise, it grieves me to leave you for today.

Mme. de Montespan

Louis, it saddens me to see you go. When you are gone, I sit in darkness waiting for the dawn.

Louis

Would God had given my wife your honeyèd tongue.

Mme. de Montespan

What's that?

Louis

So that when I am with her, she would remind me more of you. With her each half an hour drags the dull day's length, with you each hour seems but a happy moment.

Mme. de Montespan

That is because we know the wisdom, you and I, of crowding all into the moment. All of our love, all of our life. France, you will never know how much I love you.

Louis

[*Lyrically.*]

Françoise, I never want to know. Love is the endless finding of more love. [*Then more prosily.*] Do you know I think if I had time, I might have been a poet, but if one would be a King [*with a sigh*] one must give up all else.

Mme. de Montespan

You *are* a poet, Louis. Your deeds are epics. Your whims are history and you, sire, [*she thinks for a moment just how to put it*] well,—you are the State.

LOUIS

[*Thoughtfully.*]

I the State? Françoise, that's a phrase that's worth remembering. I am the State. The State is I.

[*He is enjoying the sound of it.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Nodding her agreement.*]

Yes, Louis, it's better that way. The State is I.

LOUIS

[*Repeating.*]

The State is I. Thanks for the wording, Françoise.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Why, nonsense, Louis, what is the wording, when the thought was yours?

LOUIS

Well then we'll share the thought, tho I'll retain the glory.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Again glancing at the door.*]

When are you leaving, sire?

LOUIS

Soon, Françoise.

Mme. de Montespan

[*More eagerly than she knows.*]
Soon?

Louis

Yes, Madame. But, by your question, would you make it sooner?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Swiftly.*]
I wish you did not have to go at all.

Louis

There's too much harping on my going. Françoise, what's in your mind?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Covering the slip.*]
Something that I hope will please you.

Louis

What, then?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Beaming with bright candor.*]
Shall I go with you, Louis?

Louis

I think the question hints that you would rather not.

Mme. de Montespan

If you don't wish it then, of course—

Louis

And you?

Mme. de Montespan

Sire, if you wish me, I will go, but shall I speak frankly?

Louis

Why not? One must speak frankly to one's King and to one's God.

[*And in the sequence God goes by the board.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Louis, you know I am only happy when I'm with you, but today—well—I am a little tired; and tomorrow, I had planned a day's rest in some still retreat. The Court's High Season has spent my strength, Your Majesty. [*She is smiling suggestively.*] I think I am a little pale. [*She turns to her mirror.*]

Louis

A trace, perhaps, but not less beautiful. [*He steps nearer to her.*] Ah, I shall miss you. Let me carry with me the sweet odour of your hair.

[*He takes her in his arms.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Looking over his shoulder at the door.*]
Louis, Louis.

Louis

[*Insinuatingly.*]
By tomorrow evening, you will come to me?

Mme. de Montespan

[*In his arms.*]
Sire, if I am better, by tomorrow noon. Why do you go at all?

Louis

Because tho I am a King I am still a slave. Some months ago this hunt was planned for these Ambassadors. It's the last courtesy. It is not fitting that a last courtesy should be omitted, lest all the others be forgotten.

Mme. de Montespan

But, for a day, then, Sire.
[*She bows to him.*]

Louis

[*With an echo of displeasure.*]
Françoise, I have not yet bowed to you. Would you thus hint to hasten my departure?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Laughing a little nervously.*]

How you misread me! Give me time, Sire, and I'll go dress and go with you, tho I never was more spent. [*She has seated herself and leans back tiredly.*] There, I'm better. Shall I go with you? [*Then swiftly.*] No? Then next week, let us go alone,—you and I,—and steal a holiday in some hidden hut, deep in the woods, at Versailles? Imagine we two quite alone. [*She is smiling languidly.*] Louis, Louis, quite alone. [*She holds out her arms to him.*]

Louis

Françoise, in the gallop of the horses I shall feel the beat of your heart. Would that tomorrow were today.

Mme. de Montespan

Only for these few hours, Sire. There, see how your love brings my strength back to me.

[*She has risen and again bowed and subtly the suggestion reaches him.*]

Louis

You're right. It's time to go.

Mme. de Montespan

Not yet,—but if you must go, good night and

think of me. [*He is at the door. She calls him back.*] My King! My King!

[*For a moment they embrace, then he is gone. She stands for a little while listening and then suddenly rushes over to the door that leads into the corridor.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Calling down the passage.*]
Madame!

[The Second Lady *enters.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Anxiously.*]
Well? Well?

The Second Lady

Madame, Lulli is outside and craves a word with you.

Mme. de Montespan

[*On the tip of temper.*]
What's that? Lulli? Bid him come back to-morrow.

The Second Lady

Madame, your pardon, but he says the matter presses.

Mme. de Montespan

We'll have him in then. And see that no one

goes near my garden. Lovers need but the night and the first sweet rising of the moon.

[The Second Lady *exits.* Madame de Montespan *turns from the door as* Lulli *enters.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Hurriedly.*]
Well, what do you want of me?

Lulli

There is still time before Molière arrives. I warn you.

Mme. de Montespan

What's that, Giovanni?

Lulli

I speak for your sake, not for mine. Madame, you are playing with fire.

Mme. de Montespan

Keep your hand out of the flame then lest your thumb be burnt. Molière is coming to do a service for the King.

Lulli

Madame, it would not be well if he stop on the way. I am your friend.

Mme. de Montespan

When it proves most friendly to yourself you're always friend. I do not think you swallow well this favour of Molière's. Is the taste too bitter, Lulli?

Lulli

Madame, I would die but to touch the hem of your gown.

Mme. de Montespan

You dare!

[The First Lady *enters.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Eagerly.*]

Well?

The First Lady

Madame, Molière is waiting in the little room beyond the corridor.

Mme. de Montespan

[*And her voice is uncontrolled.*]

At last! At last! Show him in.

[The First Lady *exits.*]

Lulli

[*Threateningly.*]

You will not listen.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Gaily.*]
What's that, Giovanni?

Lulli

[*Slowly and with insinuation.*]
Madame, I warn you I am Giovanni Lulli.

Mme. de Montespan

Lulli, I do not warn you but I am de Montespan. Now go!

[Lulli *exits and she is over at her toilet table touching her lips with a last drop of perfume and turns to face* Molière.]

Mme. de Montespan

Ah, Molière, good evening. Pray sit down. No? As you will. Molière, I think you do not like me. Am I wrong?

Molière

We are all servants of the King, Madame, and you are dear to him.

Mme. de Montespan

By indirection you are more direct. I know you do not like me. But what matter,—and yet it does matter. All my life I have wanted people to care for me. At the convent when I was a little girl one of the nuns did not love me once and be-

cause she did not love me I set fire to her veil with a candle from the altar,—from the high altar where they were about to say mass, Molière. I do not know whether God has ever forgiven me that.

MOLIÈRE

Let us hope so. There are so many masses, Madame, and perhaps God didn't miss the veil. What happened to you?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

For three days I prayed, weeping at the shrine of Our Lady, and my body was fed on too little because I had loved too much. But that is long ago and the past is over. But memories still come crowding. Is it not so, Molière?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, your pardon, I am a comedian and to a comedian the present ever presses. A comedian's faith is in the moment's laughter rather than in the fading pageants of the past. You asked me to come to you, Madame?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You are too swift. I think less speed would breed more chivalry.

MOLIÈRE

I am a very blunt man, Madame. It is perhaps because as I end my lines with a needed rhyme I

strive to edge my acts with their needed necessity. You asked me to come to you—

Mme. de Montespan

Of course, of course. Otherwise I think you would not come. You do not know why I sent for you?

[*There is a moment's pause in which she looks at him.*]

Molière

No, Madame; your whims are famous. Perhaps you'd have me scale the Tower of St. Jacques.

Mme. de Montespan

[*And her eyes smile.*]
To read the hard hearts of the gargoyles.

Molière

Perhaps? Sometimes a stone's heart is softer than a woman's will.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Laughing.*]
No, it isn't that.

Molière

[*Answering the gaiety of her mood.*]
Or perhaps you'd have me drink up the Seine. God forbid; it's muddy, Madame, near the city.

Mme. de Montespan

I think you are more thirsty for my reason than the river.

Molière

[*With an echo of impatience.*]

I am.

Mme. de Montespan

I bade you come to me to please the King, Molière.

Molière

I am his servant. What do you wish of me?

Mme. de Montespan

Whatever I wish of you your genius will accomplish.

Molière

Thanks for your faith, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

Next Tuesday is Louis' birthday. I have sent for you to ask your aid in the preparations for the festivities. Will you write a little comedy for the occasion?

Molière

It is a deep honour, Madame, but at the moment—

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Can a moment alter your loyalty to France? We will do the play at Chambord in the woods. We will deck the autumn with flowers. Cartloads will be sent up from the South, cartloads of roses.

MOLIÈRE

More serious matters—

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I will honour the pageant and your play—your play, Molière. [*She is looking at him curiously.*] Write for me the part of the nymph Iris. I will play it in a gilded veil over a robe of gold. That will be charming. Will it not? Perhaps the King himself will dance. Write me some lovely lines as Iris so that I, de Montespan, will do justice to Molière.

MOLIÈRE

The compliment is indeed a great one but at the moment, alas, I am so deep in work on my newest play, Madame. It is going well. You will understand. I do not wish to check the mood. I give my life to the characters I am creating. I am part of my comedy. The play will be, perhaps the greatest of my career. May I hope it will be an honour to France and to the King? Madame, because of my comedy I must refuse you.

Mme. de Montespan

Is it the manuscript I saw this morning in which the laughter hides the tears?

Molière

Yes, Madame, my comedy in which a lover does battle with his doubts.

Mme. de Montespan

[*And again she looks at him.*]

I know. I know. Love lies ever poised betwixt despair and ecstasy. [*A moment's pause.*] And your wife? She is so exquisite. She is well, I hope.

Molière

Well, Madame, but weary from the plays at court.

Mme. de Montespan

I'm sorry you cannot do this ballet, Molière. It would greatly please the King.

Molière

[*Slowly for there is something in her tone which he instinctively mistrusts.*]

I have too often stolen from my mind's treasury to coin these baubles for the pleasure of His Majesty. An artist, Madame, owes deep debts to what is deepest in him. We are but instruments and the

breath of creation uses us at its will. We must be ever ready for its profoundest use. The King will understand. Have I not often pleased His Majesty?

Mme. de Montespan

Often. But have you ever sought to please me, me, Françoise de Montespan? I am but a woman, Molière; is chivalry then dead at Court?

Molière

[*With a bow.*]

Chivalry is always waiting for the bidding of a woman's smile.

Mme. de Montespan

[*With a tinge of sarcasm.*]

You talk like a courtier.

Molière

[*Suddenly direct.*]

If I do so, Madame, it is because I wonder if you would tolerate me if I answered as a man.

Mme. de Montespan

Try me, Molière. Less elegance may drive nearer to the truth.

Molière

[*Changing his tone.*]

Madame, I am an actor.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Laughingly.*]

So I've heard, Molière.

Molière

Perhaps also something of a judge of others' acting.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Avoiding the imputation.*]

Yes, you have trained your wife most excellently.

Molière

[*For there is something in her tone that arrests him.*]

What do you mean?

Mme. de Montespan

Just that. What did you think I meant?

[*A pause. They are looking at each other.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Why do you hesitate? Go on. Does the great Molière then lack the word?

Molière

Not the word, Madame, but the courage.

Mme. de Montespan

Then take me for your example, my comedian. I have never lacked in courage.

MOLIÈRE

That I can believe, Madame.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Smiling.*]
Profit by me then.

MOLIÈRE

I do. I do. But still I lack the bravery to say what lies nearest to my mind.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Ah, there's where we differ, we women and you men. You have the strength to hesitate, we women but the weakness to say all.

MOLIÈRE

It's a brave frailty, Madame, when discretion guides it. A woman's weakness is often stronger than our strength. Shall I speak plainly?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Of course; what is it?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, I think this play that you would have me write is but a pretext for some other matter.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Be careful. [*Then controlling herself.*] What do you mean, Molière?

MOLIÈRE

You said that you would have me say it all.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

What is the all then?

MOLIÈRE

I do not know, and that's what troubles me. I do not like uncertainties. Round about has ever been for me too round about. I think there is a lie lurking between our minds, Madame.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You dare—no, no, go on. I like you best when you are crudest.

MOLIÈRE

[*Getting up.*]
Shall I leave you, Madame?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

No, stay; I'm hungry for untinselled honesty. What is this lie you think that lurks between us?

MOLIÈRE

I do not know, but it makes our faces dim and what is uglier, our hearts ignoble. Shall we erase this clouding smudge with truth? The play's a pretext, is it not?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Slowly.*]
Perhaps, Molière.

Molière

Madame, I thought so.

Mme. de Montespan

And if it is, what do you think it hides?

Molière

I do not know. The Court's too crowded with intrigue. Is there some one you would have me slay with verses?—or [*and he speaks the rest very slowly and very low*] or maybe kill with poison? Have you chosen me because I would be least suspected? Is it thus you would test my allegiance? Has Mme. La Valliere returned to Paris? Or is the Queen's new court lady perhaps too beautiful?

Mme. de Montespan

Molière, you dare—

Molière

I am a dramatist, Madame. You must forgive me if at times I think too vividly. If my mind's too swift retard me but I think a man's must travel quickly to outmatch a woman's.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*And her voice is strange.*]
A word may be more wounding than a rapier.

MOLIÈRE

[*Parrying.*]
A wish may be more likely than its deed. [*He is at the door.*] May I go?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Springing up.*]
No, stay a moment, Molière.

MOLIÈRE

It is a waste of words, Madame, to hint to me that at Court death silences an imagination that is over eager. I know the neighbourhood of kings is dangerous. But you called me in. If in my haste I have overstepped I am ready to pay, if needs be, with my life. Death's but a little door opening on great spaces. We do not know, Madame, but fate whispers they are free. Shall I tell the King myself that I have wounded you?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Slowly.*]
There is no fear of death, Molière.

MOLIÈRE

Have I misjudged you then? It is not death?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Not death but something that's more terrible; come closer to me.

MOLIÈRE

What is it, Madame?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Come closer. Something more terrible than death, more exquisite than life,—desire! Now do you understand? [*And her voice is trembling.*] I love you, I, Françoise de Montespan, Mistress of the King of France; I love you. [*Her voice breaks.*] I love you,—the player of the King. Have pity on me.

MOLIÈRE

This is a trick or some sudden madness. Is Lulli waiting with a sword beyond the corridor? I have not wronged you. Why do you wish to break me?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You have wronged me with your pride, Molière. I have shown you favour and you have repaid me with respect. I have been thirsty and you have given me wit to drink. I have looked at you with longing and you have turned away to listen to the low laughter of the crowd.

MOLIÈRE

Madame, I didn't know.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Now I have told you. Now you know. Is it too late, too soon?

MOLIÈRE

Neither too late nor too soon but too rash. I am the servant of the King, Madame, and even were I not you are the Mistress of my friend.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

What am I to hope for?

MOLIÈRE

Reason, Madame; this is but a mad caprice. I think later you would hate me were I to forget I were more a lover and less a man.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Then you do not think me beautiful?

MOLIÈRE

I do, Madame, too beautiful to be without your ladies. Where are they?

Mme. de Montespan

I have sent them all away. [*She takes a step nearer to him and suddenly tears open her dress at her bosom.*] See how my heart lifts in my throat to go out to you.

Molière

Madame, we are but human. Let us be afraid of what the gods are doing. Look, the wind from your garden is blowing out the candles. Let not the wind of your passion blow out the light in our souls.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Swiftly.*]

Let it blow. I am less guarded than you, Molière. I think *this* moment matters more than that to come. I have ever been mistress of the moment.

Molière

It is because of that that you are mistress of the King.

Mme. de Montespan

Ever since my childhood.

Molière

I thought fate broke the human heart when it was too imperious.

Mme. de Montespan

Before mine breaks it will answer to my will. It has been my servant all these years. When I was a little girl I had a garden and I used to think which flower I would most be like. Not of the simpler sort that hid their quiet beauty in the shadows,—no, I took the regal, purple iris for my symbol. [*And she takes one from the golden vase.*] I was but eight years old, Molière, but even then I knew that I would be like the iris. There was something so beautiful, so strangely rich in its deep lavender lifting its head above the humbler flowers.

Molière

I understand, Madame; they say La Valliere wore pale violets in her bosom.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Anger mounting in her eyes.*]

Are you more loyal to dead violets then?

[*And she has flung the iris flower to the floor.*]

Molière

I'm sorry for the lady. They say she loved the King.

Mme. de Montespan

Why waste your sorrow? She has found eternal love in God. I envy her.

MOLIÈRE

And you, Madame?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I am not ready yet for those eternities. Come closer to me. What, why do you draw back?

MOLIÈRE

Can't you see that some one stands between us?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Who, the King? What? Do you not know that each new lady at the Court is his whim's possibility? Why shouldn't I seek refuge when he leaves me lonely and when my heart calls? Do you not hear it, Molière? It is speaking to you so madly, so terribly that I've forgot the King. Can you not forget His Majesty for this one sovereign moment?

MOLIÈRE

It is not the King.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Who then? Who then?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, my wife. It is her shadow that lies between us.

Mme. de Montespan

Shadows are but fragile things, Molière.

Molière

This has the substance of our love, a love so deeply rooted in our being, Madame, that no sudden, poignant moment can shatter it. We are safe in our love, Madame. It is this love that keeps us loyal; it is the beat of our hearts, the sight of our eyes, the reason of our life.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Her eyes closed, her hand upon her bosom.*]

For such a love—for such a love— Molière, do you not pity me?

Molière

I do, and now good evening. See the twilight has fallen and the room grows dark. Shall I not have some one light more candles?

[*His hand reaches for the door.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Molière! Molière!

Molière

Madame?

Mme. de Montespan

You're right. I've been over rash. This incident—if the King should hear.

Molière

Madame, I do beseech you, you are safe and now good evening.

Mme. de Montespan

No, stay a moment. There is something I would do, for I think there is something that you should know.

Molière

That will be true until the end of time. Knowledge is always just beyond us and therein lies the comedy of humanity.

Mme. de Montespan

Is it not braver to know all, Moliere?

Molière

Braver, but less likely—else man were God. That makes the comedy humane. We are less than gods, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Significantly.*]
Is it not God-like to know all and to survive?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, I hope you will. See, the mood is over.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

No, you misjudge me; I forget myself.

MOLIÈRE

That is the great illusion. Whoever does?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*As he turns away.*]
Now it is my turn to pity you.

MOLIÈRE

[*Turning back.*]
Then we are on safer ground for pity is controllable. [*Then a little bitterly.*] Thanks, but I'd rather have you laugh at me than pity me.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

One love is dangerous, Molière. It is not wise to worship at one shrine.

MOLIÈRE

[*At a loss.*]
Madame—

MME. DE MONTESPAN

There are saints who sin.

Molière

In that truth lies man's brotherhood. What's at the end of your preamble?

Mme. de Montespan

My hesitancy.

Molière

Go on; I thought you never lacked in courage.

Mme. de Montespan

I do when it's the courage to wound another. See, now the last candle has gone out and we are indeed in shadow.

Molière

Is it too dark?

Mme. de Montespan

But that is easily altered. By now the moon is up.

[*And she rushes over to the window over her little garden and pulls back the curtain and as she does so the room is flooded with moonlight.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Now we shall see.

Molière

By moonlight all is beautiful. The moon's the

living lamp lighting with fantastic beauty the theatre of the world. Some day I must play a comedy by moonshine.

Mme. de Montespan

It would become your wife for it's the light of love.

Molière

[*Quickly.*]

What do you mean?

Mme. de Montespan

Only what your heart tells you and you won't believe. Are you sure your wife is faithful?

Molière

[*Swiftly for the thrust has gone home.*]

As sure as that you're not, Madame.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Bridling.*]

Go on; I think I like you best when you are angry. How do you know that she is innocent?

Molière

I know because she loves me.

Mme. de Montespan

Then you have not heard what they say at Court?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, would it be well for you to listen to all they say at Court?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

These bitter tongues are part of the price I pay for my power to punish. But your wife is not Mistress of the King.

MOLIÈRE

No, God be praised; she is but my wife.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

And you don't doubt her?

MOLIÈRE

Why should I when there is no reason?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

And seeing you have not wished to see?

MOLIÈRE

I have looked with a man's eyes, not a woman's.

[*And she lifts her eyes to him and her lips are curled.*]

MOLIÈRE

Armande is hungry for adulation, that is all.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

They say she is very free.

MOLIÈRE

I have given her freedom but she has never abused it. Of that there is no doubt lurking in my mind.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

And these rumours?

MOLIÈRE

At court a woman's beauty is ever sweet food for too many hungry, dirty tongues. This gossip is all noisy emptiness. I know; I know. I have loved her too deeply to have listened. No, she is innocent. There is something almost terrible in my love for her. When I love her thus is she not safe? I have surrounded her with my adoration.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Slowly.*]
And what of de Lauzun?

MOLIÈRE

[*His voice hot with rage.*]
That is a lie, Madame, a lie.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Perhaps you're right. Who knows? Who knows? But you're heated, Molière. The evening air is cool that blows up from my garden.

Let's forget these whisperings and your wife. [*Then assuming a lighter tone.*] Come here and I will show you a view of Eden.

[*She has gone over to the window.*]

Molière

[*At a loss to solve the shifting of her mood.*] What, Eden here in Paris?

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, for Eden is wherever love dwells. There is a statue of Cupid below among the trees. Look; he seems to smile when the moon is on his face. Come, see. And beyond the garden are vistas,—far, long vistas. Why are distances so beautiful? Come look and we will both forget the present in what lies beyond, there where night becomes the earth and earth the night.

[*Instinctively he draws nearer to the window.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Look, the moon is up and hangs like a great gold lantern in the trees. [*She is leaning forward.*] Listen, that is the sound of voices murmuring. Why, see, there are two lovers below there in the garden. Look, Molière, there beneath the statue of Cupid, that is for ever aiming his arrows at the heart of the world. Look closer; are they not kissing? The girl is lovely, is she not, Molière? [*His hand is trembling as he clutches the curtain.*]

Look closer. And he—he— [*Her voice is lifted.*] See, they have heard us. Why do they flee away like that? Look closer, closer. Have we not seen them both before?

[*And suddenly he flings the curtain across the window and springs back into the room.*]

MOLIÈRE

I have seen too much. I have seen the end of my life.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Coming over to him, her voice heavy with sorrow.*]

You have my pity, Jean; you have my pity.

MOLIÈRE

[*His heart on fire.*]

That is your garden. No one enters there save at your command. This is a trick,—a trick, Madame.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

You have my pity for now you know.

[*Her arms are stretched out to him. Suddenly he catches her by the wrist and flings her from him so violently that she stumbles to the floor.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Towering over her.*]

I have asked neither your pity nor this proof.

God forgive you, Madame. Why have you done this?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Cowering at his feet.*]
Because I love you.

Molière

Love? The word sounds loathsome when you speak it. That is the way a woman loves, perhaps, but not a man.

Mme. de Montespan

Sooner or later you would have found out everything. It is thus too cheaply that she sells her faith. It is because I love you that I have done this. [*She crawls over to him.*] I will be more honest.

Molière

You! You!

Mme. de Montespan

See, I give myself to you. I, Françoise de Montespan, I give myself to you. Take me, take me. [*She is on her knees before him.*] If your heart is broken I will give you strength. Bend over; for the love of God, bend over. My lips are wet with the dew of oblivion. Drink, drink. Shut out the light in my eyes with your kisses. It is in such a moment that I would die.

[*She clings to him but with a gesture of abhorrence he struggles from her*].

MOLIÈRE

Get up, Madame; I would not have you cringe before me.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Have pity on me.

MOLIÈRE

Pity! No, that's another snare. I'm not so easily beaten. Do not forget, Madame, I've looked into your garden but I'm still Molière.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

It was my will to break your spirit but you have broken mine. May Christ forgive me. See, I'm a shattered bauble in your hands.

MOLIÈRE

Get up. Remember you are Mistress of the King; you should not bend to any man.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I have offered myself to you and you do not take me. [*Her hands are clenched.*] Look, I am praying to you as though to God. Just for this hour, Jean, this one small hour, and then a lifetime to forget or to remember.

MOLIÈRE

[*Half scorn and half command.*]

Get up. This is no brothel but the palace of the King.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Weakly.*]

You do not love me then?

MOLIÈRE

[*And his voice is low.*]

Now God pity me for my love is below there in your garden.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Suddenly drawing back from him.*]

I have offered you my love. [*And then there is something terrible in her eyes.*] And you have turned away from me. What are you that you dare do this? Do you think my hate will be more welcome?

MOLIÈRE

Madame, your hate is nothing. It's the hurt. [*And he glances toward the window.*] The hurt. And now good-night.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Molière! Molière!

MOLIÈRE

[*At the door. He has half opened it.*]
Madame, good-night.

[*Her arms are stretched out to him. She is going towards him. Suddenly there is a sound. It is a key turning in the little door that leads to the apartments of the King.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Swiftly.*]
Stay, it's Louis. He's come back. He's heard our voices. If you go now he'll suspect. Stay. Give me a moment. Wait, wait, a word and I will find a way that will explain it.

[*And the little door opens and the King is in the room.*]

LOUIS

Françoise, Lulli has just sent a messenger, craving me to turn back, saying that you were ill and wanted me.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Her eyes are fraught with terror, but her lips smile as she greets him.*]
I do, Louis, always, and that means now.

LOUIS

Well, here I am. You're better?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Taking a step towards him.*]

Much, Louis, now that you have come.

[*As the King turns to seat himself he sees some one standing over by the door.*]

LOUIS

Who's that?

MOLIÈRE

[*Stepping out into the room.*]

It's I, Your Majesty.

LOUIS

What, you, Molière? I thought I heard some voices. [*He looks about him and then turns to* MME. DE MONTESPAN, *his words edged with the question.*] And are you quite alone?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*Quickly.*]

We were planning a surprise, Your Majesty, something that's a secret until your birthday.

LOUIS

[*Significantly.*]

Then I've come too soon. Is it very secret, Françoise?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Attempting to force the echo of a laugh into her voice.*]

Deeper than the Seine, Sire.

Louis

[*Slowly,—glancing at* de Montespan.]

I was starting on my way to hunt at Fontainebleau.

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, Louis, and now by God's grace you have come back.

Louis

God's grace, Madame? Sometimes Heaven's works are unexpected then?

Mme. de Montespan

What, Louis?

Louis

[*With a quick look from one to the other.*]

So! Whilst I would hunt at Fontainebleau do they lay traps in Paris here? It does not please me to find you thus alone.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Fencing for a moment's thought.*]

You're jesting, Louis.

[*She seats herself, attempting again to force a laugh.*]

Louis

No, Françoise; I save my jests for war and the assemblies. I never was in deeper earnest. Where are your ladies?

Mme. de Montespan

[*Swiftly to avoid the answer.*]

Sire, I was beseeching him to write a ballet for your birthday.

Louis

Then I'm indeed too soon. Perhaps to the regret of all of us, I wasn't born until Tuesday. Where are your ladies and the lights? Come, let's have more lights.

[*And he goes to the door and calls down the passage.*]

Louis

Lights! Lights!

[*And then he turns to* de Montespan *and the intonation of his voice is like one that commands the moment when a whip is lifted.*]

Louis

Words can seem what they sound like when the face is hidden.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Sire—

LOUIS

A moment, by your leave. [*And he takes a step nearer to* MOLIÈRE.] This is a hidden talent, Sir, that I hadn't counted on. Do you sometimes play then in the dark?

[DE MONTESPAN *springs up.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Seeing the agony in her eyes.*]

Sire, the lady pleaded but I refused.

[*She has taken a step nearer to him.*]

LOUIS

[*Ironically.*]

A lady pleaded and you turned away? I thought I was the king of gentlemen.

MOLIÈRE

I denied myself the honour of pleasing Your Majesty with this ballet for your birthday, for at the moment I am at white heat with my new comedy.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Yes, his muse was more importunate than the pleasure of his king.

[*She has said this with an attempted gaiety*

but the KING *scents its insincerity. For where women are concerned he is no fool.*]

LOUIS

We shall see my pleasure or maybe something else the better when it's lighter for here come the lackeys.

[*And they enter bearing candelabra in which are lighted candles. One is placed on the table, the other on the mantel shelf. All this while* LOUIS *never lifts his eyes from* MME. DE MONTESPAN.]

LOUIS

Madame, you seem pale tonight.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I am a little tired.

LOUIS

Where are your ladies, then, to help you get to bed?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

I sent them off with Hercules to see the monkeys.

LOUIS

What's that?

Mme. de Montespan

In the trees at the far end of the Tuileries. [*Then fencing for time.*] We had planned to put the lad in the pageant, Sire. He was to enter on a camel munching chocolates. He was to play the part of Gluttony.

Louis

And you, Madame?

Mme. de Montespan

I?— Oh, I was to play the nymph Iris in a robe of gold.

Louis

[*And his words are like the edge of a rapier.*]

You are so many coloured that I think you'd play it well.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Still smiling.*]

Thanks, Louis.

Louis

Truth is more simply clad.

Molière

Or naked, Sire, when it looks upon its naked self in pride [*and then his eyes meet a swift glance*

from de Montespan *as she goes over to the window*] or loathing.

Louis

Françoise, I've never seen you quite so beautiful.

Mme. de Montespan

[*Her voice soft.*]
Yes, Louis.

Louis

Or less honest. [*A pause.*] I think the truth lies smothering somewhere in this silence. No, leave the window open.

Molière

[*Taking a step forward but as he again sees the trembling terror in her eyes he stops.*]
Your Majesty—
[*A pause.*]

Mme. de Montespan

What's the matter, Louis?

Louis

I do not know. You do. There's too much here that's left unsaid.
[*She is looking out into the garden.*]

LOUIS

Well, then, what is it?

[*Suddenly she wheels around. The expression in her face is changed. Where a moment before there might have been the passing shadow of a fear, there is now a look of purpose if not of triumph.*]

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Your doubt should be as empty as—well, as empty as my garden is. [*She has glanced up swiftly at* MOLIÈRE. *Then to the* KING.] If you must hear the truth it won't be pleasant.

LOUIS

Go on, go on; a King must know and master all.

MOLIÈRE

Else he were less than king.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Louis, you came just in the nick of time. I have implored him but he wouldn't listen. [*And now as she looks at* MOLIÈRE *her eyes are half closed with hate.*] Perhaps he'll be more willing when his king commands.

LOUIS

[*Ironically.*]

I've already bit at this ballet, Françoise, but it won't go down.

Mme. de Montespan

The ballet was a subterfuge.

Louis

[*And his voice is bitter*].

Yes, so I thought. I am a diplomat as well as king and therefore used to lying.

Mme. de Montespan

A subterfuge I used to save him. Now you shall know the truth.

[*And then turning on* Molière *she springs the trap she has been resolving and all the passion that's pent up in her spills out in a burning flood of words.*]

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, I sent my women off because I did not wish that they should hear what I had to say to him. If that's displeasing to you I did it to stem a displeasure that will hurt you more deeply and nearer to the quick. No one should hear what I've been begging of him but you have forced me, Sire. [*And her eyes are like two sharp swords of flame.*] I have been beseeching your favourite, this comedian; I have been imploring him, I, the Mistress of

the King, to destroy a scandalous play he has written before the matter reached your ears.

Louis

What play is this?

Mme. de Montespan

One that should never have been thought of.

Louis

Why not?

Mme. de Montespan

Because in this comedy he has heaped ridicule upon my husband and myself.

Louis

[*Swiftly.*]
What's that?

Mme. de Montespan

This, your little actor, has made merry with my soul, Your Majesty; mine, Françoise de Montespan's. Dare any man do that?

Molière

Sire—

Mme. de Montespan

[*And her hand is lifted to command his silence.*]

Perhaps, Louis, in your great clemency you might have pardoned this—yes, even this—but your dear player, grown too proud and pompous from the grace of your regard, has gone another step, a step that's too near treason, Sire, and in base disloyalty, in this same play has made even you, yes, you, Your Majesty, a butt for the derision of the Court.

LOUIS

[*For a moment towering with all his little might.*]

What's that?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*And the words grate against her teeth.*]

He has used you, his King, as a painted puppet for his lewd imaginings so that the lowest clowns in France can hoot at you, their sovereign. Now do you see why I lied to save him? I knew you held this actor dear, but now, now—

LOUIS

Is this the truth, Molière?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Why look, Louis, can't you see his face tells all?

[*For* MOLIÈRE *stands aghast. Her ruse has been too sudden in its turning.*]

LOUIS

No, there's some error here. Molière would not do that.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Ask him, Your Majesty; he'll not dare deny it. Lulli had news of this at Chambord. After the fêtes there I sent for Molière but he would not come. I sent for him to beg him to destroy this comedy because I knew you loved him and because I've seen the terrible just haste of your displeasure when anger moves you. Again this evening I bade him come to me. Yes, I have suffered this—even this—for you and now I've told you all out of my love for you and my deep loyalty.

[*The thrust was well chosen. She has touched the* KING *in his most vulnerable spot, his vanity.*]

LOUIS

Molière, is this so? Have you dared to laugh at me?

MOLIÈRE

Sire, if you'll grant me time I can explain, though it's not easy in the web that's spun about me.

LOUIS

If you have done this I do not think that words will alter it.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Some of the filthy sheets were read to Lulli.

MOLIÈRE

Ah, Giovanni! I might have guessed it. [*Then with a smile that sneers.*] Your Majesty, no man's a friend at Court whose foot is on the ladder.

[DE MONTESPAN *is about to speak but his tone arrests her.*]

MOLIÈRE

In life no woman's true whose heart is hungry.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Louis—Louis!

LOUIS

What's that to do with this?

MOLIÈRE

Nothing. [*And his words are for* DE MONTESPAN *and not the* KING.] Nothing except that all things tie together thus to drag me down.

LOUIS

Have you written such a play?

MOLIÈRE

Sire, the matter's but a jest.

LOUIS

Is it a jest to make laughter of your King?

MOLIÈRE

Do not the gods make laughter of us all?

LOUIS

I do not think your similes can make this fact more lovely. Come, have you written such a comedy?

MOLIÈRE

If envious eyes so read it, yes, it's written.

LOUIS

You dare to be disloyal to your King?

[DE MONTESPAN *is watching him. She has gauged correctly, for His Majesty's anger is mounting past control.*]

MOLIÈRE

Not disloyal to my King, but loyal to my muse. The play's but meant for laughter.

LOUIS

Is no price, then, too high to pay for laughter?

MOLIÈRE

You weigh the matter with a weight that's not its purpose.

LOUIS

Sir, if you have made this lady seem ridiculous, why, that's enough.

MOLIÈRE

It's her will to make me seem something baser still and that's a traitor to Your Majesty. My play is but a farce written in a moment's merriment. There may be reasons though why there are others who would make of this comedy a sudden scaffold for my hanging. Your Majesty, I do beseech you, let's have done with this.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

Sire, the matter is not so easily scattered. You'll be the jesting stock of Paris for this author has crucified you upon the filthy gibbet of his wit.

MOLIÈRE

Madame, and you would break me upon the hidden rack of your desire?

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*To* LOUIS.]

Forgive this insult and he'll be the first of many who'll dare gibe at you.

Molière

You urge a low intention that I never meant.

Mme. de Montespan

[*And the words bite.*]

Sire, is nothing holy to these witty men?

Molière

Madame, is nothing safe beyond your hate? [*Then to the* King.] This comedy, Your Majesty, may mean much mirth hereafter, when you and I and this too loyal lady here are but dry dust that's scattered in the mad whirlings of the wind.

Mme. de Montespan

Louis, he has flung low laughter in your face and you are less than King if you forgive him.

Louis

No, for it's gone beyond forgiveness and has reached command. Molière, I command you to destroy this comedy.

[*And he lifts his hand as though to strike him.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Stepping back, his head high lifted.*]
You command me, Sire?

LOUIS

Am I not still your King?

MOLIÈRE

Yes, to command me, Sire, but it's left to Molière to obey.

LOUIS

What's that?
[*And he threateningly steps nearer to him.*]

MOLIÈRE

Yes, you have made of me a courtier to obey you, and if you strike me it would be my craven duty to beg pardon with a smile. But now the truth breaks in the dim places of my mind. Sire, you command me to destroy this comedy. What matter if I do or do not? You'll still be King of France, and I, Molière, tho there be one farce more or less. The play is nothing. It's this command that matters. For that's the lash that makes me feel how lowly under the beatings of your will I've bent to serve you. What have I done at your too base commands? What have I left undone? What godlike biddings have I left unanswered

to pipe the paltry pageants of your Court? Oh, that's the deep dishonour of it all,—that I, Molière, who in my plays have hooted at the hypocrites and with my pen have flayed the scheming seekers, that I, Molière, here at your pampered Court, to your too honeyed orders have been myself a liar and a slave.

Louis

[*And his voice is the voice of a king.*]

Beware!

Molière

[*And his voice is the voice of a man who greets his freedom.*]

A moment, Sire, for this moment's mine, this sudden moment that smites with blasting truth the dark remembered days and deeds that crowd about me. Now I would go out upon the bridges of your Paris and shout to all the listening crowds. Now let all those come at whom I've laughed and with their pitiless laughter let them hurl laughter back at me. Now I must drink the bitter acid that I've flung for now I know that often, oh, too often, I've left unwritten the deep truth that moves the human spirit to buy this gilded pleasure of a King.

Mme. de Montespan

Yes, of your King, by the Divine right of God.

[*And now she stands between them.*]

Molière

Yes, of this King by the blind right of accident, this King who for his tinselled whim has chained my spirit. I am Molière and Molière should know no King nor any rule save to serve the world with truth.

Louis

Molière, I hold your destiny here between my fingers.

[*And he lifts them as though to snap them.*]

Molière

Open your hand, Sire. My fame no longer lies between your fingers but in the heart of France. They are waiting for me, all my people. It is for them I will write. It is for them I have lived and dreamed. Ever since the old days and I, an humble, an unknown player, followed the ox-cart with a song in my heart through the winding lanes of Languedoc.

Louis

[*Slowly, for his sudden anger has become something that's more lasting.*]

Drink deeply of your words, my player, for words are but the wine of hope that drugs us.

Molière

No, I am not drugged on words but thirsty for my freedom.

LOUIS

[*And his voice is sinister.*]

Be not too rash to cast me off, my brave comedian. See, if I wish to I can break you as I break the crystal of this watch. [*And as he speaks he takes the little watch from among the trinkets that are lying on the dressing table and splinters the glass against its edge.*] Look, for the moment I have halted time. The hour has stopped just on the hour. Perhaps it is your hour, my comedian. [*And then bitterly, driving each word home.*] When I forget then France forgets.

MOLIÈRE

No, my people, they will not forget. They are waiting with shouts to greet me.

MME. DE MONTESPAN

[*And now her smile is filled with triumph.*]

We shall see. The King is still the King.

MOLIÈRE

Yes, we shall see. [*And then turning on the* KING.] Sire, I have been a servile lackey to your laughter and at your bidding your powdered clown; but these things I now throw off for ever, for now my mind shall be my sovereign and my unshackled soul, my king.

Louis

Molière, remember I have spoken.

Molière

Sire, remember it is thus I answer you. I have put my faith in kings; now I will give it back to France.

[*And thus sacrificing his fame as an author and an actor and the future of his company, he rushes from the palace.*]

Louis

[*After a moment's silence, for in* Molière's *voice far off has sounded the dim echo of the fall of kings.*]

That fool has been too noisy with his words.

Mme. de Montespan

Sire, what matter, for if I know you, and I think I do, your player has outrun his breath. Now may I close the window? For at last the twilight's fallen and the night is growing damp.

[*Then as she stands in the window niche.*]

Louis

Françoise, now I know you never were so beautiful. Look, the moonlight's all about you.

[*And it plays about her hair.*]

Mme. de Montespan

[*Her voice sweet and low with languor as she comes over to him.*]

Louis, my lover, come let's see how fair my bed of silver is, for look; the moon that makes me beautiful has spread its hand of silver on the sheets.

[AND THE CURTAIN FALLS]

ACT III

THE CHARACTERS IN ACT III ARE

CLAUDE CHAPELLE, *a life-long friend of Molière.*
LA FONTAINE.
A DOCTOR.
LA FOREST.
COLINGE.
MOLIÈRE.
THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE.
ANOTHER ACTRESS.
ARMANDE.
SEVERAL ACTORS *in the Fantastic Costumes of the Ballet.*
THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN
and
THE KING.

The Scene is the same as Act I.

The time of the action of Act III is before, during, and after the fourth performance of MOLIÈRE'S *"Imaginary Invalid," February seventeenth, 1673.*

ACT III

During Act III the curtain is lowered to denote the passing of two hours' time.

The scene is the same as Act I, MOLIÈRE'S *Study at the Palais Royal. It is four o'clock of a winter's afternoon and through the window is seen the view of the nearby houses and the falling snow. A fire is lit in the deep fireplace and in a corner is a brazier. Though there has been little actual change in the room there should be suggested in the first episode an atmosphere of quiet and a hint of sadness in contrast to the crowded and more brilliant rhythm of Act I.*

The second episode which is played during and after the fourth performance of the "Imaginary Invalid" should be pitched with a sense of the foreboding of the end and throughout there should be suggested the silent stir which pervades the back stage of a theatre during a performance. A view of the play that is going on can be seen by the actors through the door in the left wall of MOLIÈRE'S *study.*

When the curtain lifts on the first episode, LA FON-

TAINE, CHAPELLE, *a life-long friend of* MOLIÈRE'S, *and the* DOCTOR *are seated at the Master's table and are drinking the Master's wine. Near the fireplace sits* LA FOREST. *In her lap is a costume she is mending. Close to her is* COLINGE, *who for the early part of the scene is silent. When* LA FOREST *is up and about he moves nearer to the fire to warm his hands.*

CHAPELLE *is standing and with lifted glass is singing.*

CHAPELLE

Tra-la-la-la!

LA FONTAINE

Miraculous! Though the intention is that of a nightingale the voice is that of an angry bull. How do you like it, Doctor?

THE DOCTOR

I know so little about music.

LA FONTAINE

In such matters ignorance is best, for music is the divine riddle whose answer is itself. [*Then to* CHAPELLE.] Another song, Claude.

CHAPELLE

Tra-la-la!

La Forest

[*Rushing over to him.*]

For the love of God, if you're the nightingale, be silent. He's asleep in there, resting before the play.

[*And she points to* Molière's *dressing-room.*]

Chapelle

My friend, the entire troupe might be resting for all the impression Molière's latest play has made on Paris. [*But at the moment song seems to be the most pressing thing and so he continues.*] Tra-la-la!

La Forest

If your throat's so parched that you must be making sounds like that, I'll fetch another bottle. I'd rather have you drunk than singing.

La Fontaine

Why not both? If not drunk on wisdom, then on wine. Life is the merry-go-round of disillusion.

La Forest

[*To* La Fontaine.]

Monsieur, don't you think that maybe there's talk enough in the world already?

Chapelle

Tra-la-la-la!

La Forest

Keep quiet, all of you.

[*She goes over to* Molière's *door.*]

Chapelle

It might be better if he awoke and came and drank with us. Then he might forget Armande. It's six months since she left him, isn't it?

La Forest

Be still, for the love of God. No one dare speak her name.

La Fontaine

Then let us drink to silence. Fill the cup, La Forest; we will drink our dreams. It is only when we close our eyes that we see everything.

La Forest

[*Back at the table.*]

What are we to do? He's for ever making speeches.

La Fontaine

Is there still another bottle?

La Forest

You know the master has never been a saver when it comes to friends.

[*She goes over to the cupboard; the* Doctor *follows her.*]

The Doctor

None of you knows how ill he is. [Colinge *looks up, listening.*] If he plays today the strain may be too much. I've warned you.

La Forest

Shh! What if he should hear you? He'll not listen to me. He'll not listen to any one. It is only when he is acting that he seems to forget her.

Chapelle

[*Obliviously singing.*]

"The springtime when the new rains fall—"

La Fontaine

La Forest, listen; you're a woman. This song has to do with love.

La Forest

What?

La Fontaine

Love, the green season in the world and in the heart of man.

La Forest

[*Coming back to the table.*]

Shhh! Keep quiet.

The Doctor

[*To* Colinge.]

Why does he have them about at all?

Colinge

He likes to sit listening to their songs. It's like in the old days when he was still the King's comedian.

The Doctor

How did he lose the favour of the Court?

Colinge

No one knows. They say the Italian Lulli lied about him.

Chapelle

[*Singing.*]

"Then in my heart the skylarks call—"

The Doctor

[*Over at the table.*]

Gentlemen, a word. Your friend is very ill.

Chapelle

Nonsense; he's been like this before. Now that the people are in Paris for the fair the houses will be better. [*He drinks.*] That makes all the difference.

La Forest

You are right, M. Claude. When the people laugh it's like new blood in his veins.

Chapelle

Then let us drink to hope and houses though there weren't fifty people out in front on Monday.

La Forest

That's a lie. There were easily seventy.

La Fontaine

What? Are there still threescore faithful people here in Paris? And in the old days the King's guard had to keep the crowds away.

La Forest

Each day his comedy goes better.

La Fontaine

What matter? No play matters unless the great world sets the pace, the great stupid world that stumbles tipsy along its road of stars. More wine, La Forest. The Court's forgotten Molière though he is still the greatest man in France.

La Forest

Soon this "Imaginary Invalid" of his will be known everywhere.

La Fontaine

His "Imaginary Invalid"! With what an undreamed whimsy fate has set the stage, that he, an

invalid, in fact, should play the clownish victim of these pills and purgings. Life—life—what was I saying—ah, well, no matter. Fill the glass.

La Forest

This is the last bottle. Soon the actors will be coming.

Chapelle

[*Very lugubriously.*]

Woe is me!

La Fontaine

What's the matter?

La Forest

He's always like that when he isn't empty. In a moment he will want to die.

Chapelle

I do. I do.

La Forest

What did I tell you?

La Fontaine

Which way lies the river?

La Forest

What do you want with the river? Isn't he wet enough?

La Fontaine

It's the cleanest way. He might jump in. I don't remember but I'm sure I saw the river somewheres this morning.

Chapelle

Woe is me!

La Forest

Stop it, I tell you. It's the tenth time in two weeks that you want to go to heaven when your breath's so strong that St. Peter wouldn't let you pass.

Chapelle

[*Sadly.*]

Is there still time for repentance?

La Fontaine

[*Dryly.*]

Doubtless; there always is—time, if not repentance.

Chapelle

Thanks, for blesseder than the needle's eye is the camel that repents. Now just one more drop to strengthen me on the way to righteousness.

La Forest

Hurry; the troupe is late this afternoon.

COLINGE

In the old days by this time there would already be a crowd at the window.

CHAPELLE

Good-bye!

LA FONTAINE

What if you should really get to heaven after all with all the angels singing out of key? But that's a risk we all must run.

CHAPELLE

Farewell, my friends. La Forest, tell your master—

MOLIÈRE

[*Standing in the doorway of his dressing-room.*]

What? Your voices woke me.

[*He is spent and weary. Some of the old assurance and force have gone out of his manner, but still at moments there are flashes of the ancient power.*]

LA FONTAINE

You've come just in time, Jean, to bid the faltering Claude farewell.

MOLIÈRE

[*Stepping toward the door that leads to the street.*]

Good-bye, both of you, and come back early for the play. Half of the places are sold already.

Colinge

More, master; some ten or fifteen more.

Molière

What's that, Colinge? You have been in the theatre fifty years and your eye is still upon the box-office.

La Fontaine

[*With mock seriousness.*]

What mean such trifles when Claude's doom is writ? [*For* Chapelle *is unsteadily making for the door.*] Look, Jean; Claude is on his way to death.

Molière

That's true of all of us. But in the meanwhile is there no more wine?

La Forest

Not that, Master. He's swilled until his gills are running over and now there's nothing left him but to die.

Molière

[*Laughingly.*]

Why should he leave the house then, for here's a doctor waiting to help him on the way? [*Then to the* Doctor.] Good day, sir.

THE DOCTOR

You're feeling stronger?

MOLIÈRE

Well again, for sleep has bettered the vile stuff you gave me.

CHAPELLE

Farewell, farewell.

MOLIÈRE

[*Smiling.*]

Claude, have you considered the matter well?

LA FONTAINE

He's plumed philosophy to all its bitter dregs.

MOLIÈRE

What's a philosophy? The shadow of a lie cast from the light of truth. A help before and after never—now.

CHAPELLE

The river, the river!

MOLIÈRE

Well, if you insist. Good-bye.

[*And charmingly he holds out his hand to him.*]

CHAPELLE

[*Sitting down at the table.*]

Good-bye.

[*At this moment two members of the troupe arrive.*]

The Actress who plays Toinette

It's good to see you up and strong again.

Molière

Thanks. There'll be a splendid house in front today.

The Second Actress

We've inquired at the window. So far none of the courtiers' seats are sold.

[La Forest *motions her to be quiet.*]

Molière

What difference? Who wants these gabbing dandies on the stage? Don't you know that it's the laughter of the pit that matters?

La Forest

[*To the women.*]
Hurry or you'll be late.

The Actress who plays Toinette

All right. All right.

The Second Actress

[*To* Molière.]
Sir, I hope in the new play you write there'll be a part for me and not only this bit in the ballet.

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

What, you? [*She laughs.*] When you have had my experience you will have the right to ask for a part.

THE SECOND ACTRESS

Yes, and when one is as beautiful as I, one may expect it.

[*She smirks beatifically.*]

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

What's that, darling?

MOLIÈRE

[*Smiling.*]

Ladies, according to your deserts art will serve you.

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

Art, indeed; I'd like to know what the theatre has to do with art? [*Then to the* SECOND ACTRESS.] Come, darling.

[*They start to go.*]

MOLIÈRE

Ladies, play beautifully, for soon all Paris will be clamouring for a sight of you.

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

Thanks, sir. [*Then to the* SECOND ACTRESS.] You speaking lines, indeed.

[*And she bursts into a peal of laughter.*]

The Second Actress

Dear, why don't you give imitations of the King's hyena in the tumbler's booth on the bridge?

The Actress who plays Toinette

You, indeed. Ha-ha.

[*They exit.*]

La Fontaine

[*Looking after them.*]

Can't the children of the Lord love one another?

La Forest

They do, although they are always bickering.

La Fontaine

No, I do not believe it.

Molière

Why not?

La Fontaine

Because they are actors.

Molière

You do us actors an injustice. We may love others but first of all we must love ourselves for our ego is our instrument and it is only through love that we reach perfection. [*Then to* Chapelle *who has seated himself at the table and is pouring*

out another glass of wine.] Claude, I see you're bent on going.

CHAPELLE

[*Sadly.*]

Yes, but before I die I'd like to see you do your Invalid once more.

LA FONTAINE

That's wise. The play's the wittiest he's written.

MOLIÈRE

La Forest, do you hear that?

LA FOREST

Don't believe him; he's been drinking, too.

MOLIÈRE

Then surely it's the truth, for critics lie when sober. My comedy is good. The part grows richer as I play it.

THE DOCTOR

[*To* MOLIÈRE.]

Sir, though you scoff at me I beg you not to act today.

MOLIÈRE

What? You would have me disappoint my public and my company and this gallant gentleman who

has so nobly decided to live until tomorrow just to see me do Argan once again. [*Then to the others.*] Come, gentlemen, I will go with you to the ticket window. I too, Colinge. [*Then when they have reached the door.*] And come back early, friends, I urge you, for the house will be so full that there will be no room—[*and in his eyes there is a strange look*] no room, Claude, even for this death that you are seeking. [*Then to the* DOCTOR, *pointing to* CLAUDE.] Go with them till the wine wears off. He has more need of you than I.

[MOLIÈRE, LA FONTAINE, CLAUDE *and the* DOCTOR *exit.*]

COLINGE

La Forest, he's worse. I can see it in his face.

LA FOREST

The Doctor's right if he play—

COLINGE

He will, La Forest, even though—

LA FOREST

You are right, Colinge. I, too, know the master. Alas, sad times have come to all of us.

COLINGE

Sad times, yes. But these days are not all bitterness. Sometimes I watch him sitting there by the

fire and a smile comes into his face, a smile like one sees on the faces of children when they're sleeping.

La Forest

Can we do nothing?

Colinge

I have thought for weeks wondering what is best to do.

La Forest

He speaks often of the old time. Perhaps if he would go to Auteuil. You and I will go with him, Colinge, won't we?

Colinge

I will go with the master even into the great darkness if he but hold out his hand to me.

La Forest

I have spoken with the few friends that remain loyal. They say so little that I know that they are thinking much.

Colinge

And Armande—

La Forest

No, we must not mention her. I tried to little by little after she had gone but it seemed as though

he didn't hear me. Now no one ever speaks of Armande or of the King.

Colinge

What I have done, La Forest, may seem madness to you.

La Forest

[*Quickly.*]

Have you asked Monsieur La Fontaine to beg His Majesty's forgiveness for Molière?

Colinge

No, that is over.

La Forest

Sometimes I think it hurts him that he's forgotten at the Louvre.

Colinge

No, one evening they were speaking of Racine and the success of the company at the Bourgogne and when they were gone he said, "Colinge, such little things as fame are of the moment, but what is of the heart is of eternity." And though he did not think I knew it his hand closed about the broken pieces of a little fan he always carries with him.

La Forest

What you have done—is it about Armande?

Colinge

Yes, I have seen her.

La Forest

You have seen her? Where?

Colinge

She has been living alone at Chartres. I have known it all along. She wants to come back to him. It is only the master that she has loved. I have been waiting till he spoke of her. Waiting for some hint, some sign that I might tell him.

La Forest

Sometimes he mutters her name when he is sleeping and then I must go out of the room lest I wake him with my weeping.

Colinge

Things have not gone well with the great Molière but his pride is still unbroken. No, he never speaks of her, La Forest, but just the same, I think, that if only once he could clasp her in his arms and know that she still loves him that that would be the last happiness he could ask of life.

La Forest

[*With a tinge of anger.*]

No, that is not possible.

Colinge

Why?

La Forest

I will not speak her name to him.

Colinge

Are you afraid?

La Forest

[*And perhaps for a moment her heart is more rebellious than she knows.*]
Of what his eyes will say though his lips be silent. We cannot do that, Colinge.

Colinge

We,—not you perhaps, but I, I will do it.

La Forest

What?

Colinge

I have done it. Armande is coming back.

La Forest

[*Echoing him.*]
Armande is coming back?

Colinge

Word came from her this morning. My son has ridden all the night to bring it to me. She's coming

though she doesn't know how ill the master is. She'll be here before the twilight, surely.

La Forest

[*Slowly, as though to herself.*]

Armande is coming back.

Colinge

If I have done wrong the good God in heaven will forgive me but I meant my error to be right.

La Forest

May God in heaven forgive all of us, even her.

Colinge

The master, La Forest, he still loves her.

La Forest

Yes, Colinge, yes. Only those who love can understand this loving and they because they know that love is past all understanding.

Colinge

So life has taught you that?

La Forest

I am a woman and have gone the way of all women—[*then switching and a little brusquely*], though I end my days in peeling onions. Have you time before the play to go to the pastry cook's and bring in some supper for the master?

Colinge

Yes, there is still half an hour. [*He is at the door to the street.*] It will be a happy feast; wait and see.

La Forest

[*Stopping him.*]

Her coming back—we must be careful how we go about it.

Colinge

I have spoken to the doctor. It will be best after the play this evening, just before supper; then he will tell the master that she has come. We will know what to do, you and I.

La Forest

You and I. We are all that are left of the troupe, Colinge, of the famous troupe of Molière. We are all that are left to love him. Ah, what's the matter with me? Now I must fix the soup.

Colinge

Don't forget the cheese.

La Forest

[*Herself again.*]

Begone; who are you to order me? Haven't I been making it for twenty years? Don't you suppose I know how he wants it?

COLINGE

I'll hurry back and see that he sleep a little before the play. All will be well, La Forest. This morning I saw a look of gladness in his eyes. The master's tired, that is all. See that he sleep a little before the play.

[*He is going out as* MOLIÈRE *enters.*]

MOLIÈRE

Where are you going, Colinge?

COLINGE

To fetch some supper, master.

MOLIÈRE

Don't be late, Colinge; remember we cannot play without you.

[*Then as* COLINGE *exits,* LA FOREST *goes over to the brazier in the corner and begins preparing the soup.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Looking through the door that leads to the stage.*]

Is everything ready for the play?

LA FOREST

Yes, master, everything is ready. Now sit down a moment and I'll bring your soup to you. I didn't want to wake you earlier. [*He has seated himself in his chair at the end of the table, in front of the fireplace.*] Here, now, this way.

[*And she arranges a pillow behind his head.*]

Molière

Thanks. How good the soup smells!

La Forest

There's Parmesan cheese.

Molière

Well, let me have it.

La Forest

[*Scolding him.*]
You'll have to wait till it's ready.

Molière

Of course; do you know, La Forest, I've been practising bravery all my life?

La Forest

[*Looking up quickly, a little frightened.*]
For what? For what?

Molière

Just once to be brave enough to disobey you.

La Forest

I'd leave you on the moment if you did and where would the great Molière be without La For-

est? Here, I'll put this about you. [*And as she speaks she takes a robe from one of the chests and puts it over him.*] Now you mustn't move.

Molière

I'll have to, just a little, to smell the soup. Ah, how good it is! Such must have been the odour of manna in the wilderness or of ambrosia on Olympus.

La Forest

Now you're talking like Monsieur La Fontaine.

Molière

What?

La Forest

Saying words that crowd the mouth. Tell me, master, you men who write, do you listen to yourself when you're talking?

Molière

[*Smiling.*]
Perhaps; I never thought of that.

La Forest

Not you, master; I meant Monsieur La Fontaine. His mind chatters like a magpie's. When he isn't talking he's forgetting.

Molière

He forgets many things but not his loyalty to me. Life has been kind in that, La Forest. Life has given me the gift of friends and when the penny pipes of fame are silent it is friends that matter most. Colinge has not forgotten and you and Jean, and Claude—dear Claude— .

La Forest

Master, that drunkard is a good-for-nothing.

Molière

Only time can tell the good from the nothing.

La Forest

Give him time and there won't be a drop of red wine left in France.

Molière

It is thus he finds his peace.

[*He is tired and his head falls back against his chair.*]

La Forest

Master, won't you sleep a little before the play?

Molière

[*Wearily.*]

Have you forgotten the soup?

La Forest

It will be ready in a minute now. [*She goes over to him and tucks the robe about him.*] Master, you're not cold?

Molière

No.

La Forest

You're feeling better.

Molière

Much, much.

La Forest

Then God be praised.

Molière

Your voice is like a mother's. Do you think I'm still a little boy?

[*He has taken her hand.*]

La Forest

Master, something in your heart has never grown up.

Molière

You're right; you're right, La Forest. Because of that I am still a comedian.

[*And as she looks at him a smile that would hide his infinite weariness comes into his eyes.*]

La Forest

The costumes needed little mending.

Molière

Soon we will have new ones.

La Forest

Soon, Monsieur?

Molière

For the new season in the spring.

La Forest

[*Steadying her voice.*]

In the spring? [*She is over at the brazier.*] Ah, how good it smells!

Molière

Why do you keep your back turned? Is there something in your face that you would not have me see?

La Forest

What should there be? Can't you see I'm busy?

Molière

Come here, La Forest.

[*And she is over next to him and he has again taken her hand and sits for a moment silently gazing at her.*]

MOLIÈRE

So, so, your eyes are a little damp but deep down your soul is smiling as it has for all these years. You have done well, my friend, for whilst we, the wise ones, have hurt our hearts seeking for happiness, you, every day, year in, year out, in your simple duty have lit the candles for the play.

LA FOREST

[*Brusquely.*]
The price of candles is going up.

MOLIÈRE

You have been as a silent priestess of light at the holy altar of our laughter, and it is well to laugh, to laugh lest man remembering—
[*His voice falters.*]

LA FOREST

You will be tired before the play.

MOLIÈRE

I have known much joy and sorrow, La Forest, but it is best to remember what is best. See, I have bid that tipsy Claude still live, and why? Because I—even I, who feel the mirthless shadows crowding round me, know that the fight of life is splendid till the end. [*He is up.*] We shall have new can-

dles for the comedy today and they shall laugh, all of them, out there. They shall laugh.

[*And it is as though the house with eager eyes were there before him.*]

La Forest

Master, you are tired. Shall I not tell them to close the ticket window?

Molière

Why, no; I never was more ready. Today I might be the Molière of the years gone by. Do you remember, La Forest, how in the old days you used to sit there at the cart's end in the sunlight ever sewing?

La Forest

I do, master.

Molière

Life, too, is that expert seamstress, ever changing the sackcloth of yesterday into the motley of tomorrow. But we must not look too closely for sometimes those bright red patches in the domino are but the torn hearts of men.

La Forest

[*Swiftly, so as to hide what is beginning in her voice.*]

Your soup is ready.

[*She brings it over to him.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Sipping it.*]

How good it tastes!

LA FOREST

I learnt to make it this way years ago at Lyons. Do you think we'll play at Lyons soon again?

MOLIÈRE

At Lyons, soon again? Who knows?

LA FOREST

[*Carefully, feeling her way.*]

It was there for the first time that Mme. Madeleine was ill and the part—was—played—by—[*Suddenly* MOLIÈRE *has straightened in his chair.*] Monsieur, let's go back to Auteuil.

MOLIÈRE

No, the country is desolate in winter.

LA FOREST

When the fair is over maybe not half the places will sell and in Auteuil, well, what difference?

MOLIÈRE

This. I am Molière, and Paris is still my throne.

LA FOREST

A month there in the quiet and all will be well again.

MOLIÈRE

Why waste a month when your broth revives me now? It is time to dress.

[*He has got up but weakly sinks back into his chair.*]

LA FOREST

Monsieur.

MOLIÈRE

Well?

LA FOREST

You're still quite— [*And then because of the look in his face she changes suddenly*] I think the woman who plays Toinette does it well.

MOLIÈRE

Why do you switch? I know what's troubling you.

LA FOREST

Not that, Monsieur. The doctor says you're really well again.

MOLIÈRE

Of course. Listen, some of the audience are coming.

LA FOREST

No, some of the actors are entering by the door beyond the stage. The days seems shorter here in Paris. It's not yet five. [*His head drops forward*

a little.] Master, do not play today. Will you not listen to me? I have loved you like a mother.

Molière

That love at least is past corrupting.

[*He has sunk deeper in his chair.*]

La Forest

Go in, lie down; I'll wake you in time before the play.

Molière

No, fetch my wig and make-up now.

[*She exits into his dressing-room For a moment, his eyes half closed, he leans back murmuring to himself.*]

La Forest

[*Entering.*]

Come to your room, Master; see how tired you are.

[*He doesn't answer. She comes over and puts his wig and make-up on the little table that is near him.*]

La Forest

There, he's sleeping. [*She bends over him, very gently, like an anxious mother.*] My son! My son!

[*For a little while she stands watching him, wiping the tears from her eyes. Then* Colinge *enters, a basket on his arm.*]

La Forest

Shhh! He's sleeping. What have you brought?

Colinge

A goose liver and patties and some almond tarts.

La Forest

[*Scolding him in a whisper.*]
What a fool you are! Do you think we're going to feed the King's fat jailer? Goose, indeed, and patties. If it weren't for the noise I'd fling them at your stupid head.

Colinge

[*Delving in the basket.*]
And here are eggs and half a chicken.

La Forest

Well, that's nearer right.

Colinge

It's like you women to judge a man before the basket's empty.

La Forest

And like you men to have nothing in the basket that's worth the judging.

COLINGE

There's some news.

LA FOREST

Who cares? Since when has there not been news? The serpent started news in Eden.

COLINGE

They were whispering at the pastry shop.

LA FOREST

Well?

COLINGE

So you do want to hear it after all?

LA FOREST

No, you poor old man. [*She is leaning towards him.*] I'm waiting to hear you sing the psalms in Turkish.

[*They are laughing quietly together and* MOLIÈRE *has awakened and is listening.*]

LA FOREST

Well, what is it?

COLINGE

Who do you think was at the pastry shop?

LA FOREST

Any one of all the fools in Paris.

COLINGE

Baron.

LA FOREST

Baron?

COLINGE

And his tongue was wagging about the company at the Bourgogne.

LA FOREST

They have done nothing. The troupe of Molière is still the greatest troupe in France.

COLINGE

Fat in fame, La Forest, but thin in favour.

LA FOREST

Shhh! What if he should hear you? What was the boy saying?

COLINGE

There's an intrigue at the palace to reinstate Molière.

LA FOREST

Go on; go on. Why do you lick the words with your tongue?

COLINGE

I cannot talk as quickly as you listen.

LA FOREST

Well, what is it? Who has spoken to the King?

COLINGE

No one knows from whence or how it came. But they hint some woman's in it.

LA FOREST

Well? Well?

COLINGE

They say some one has tried to reach His Majesty to crave pardon for Molière, and that the King—

MOLIÈRE

[*Suddenly springing up.*]

Who has dared do that? Is not my soul my own?

COLINGE

God forgive me, master. I thought you were asleep.

LA FOREST

Now look what you've done with your gossip. Master, be calm; be calm.

[*And* MOLIÈRE *stands beside his table, his hand reaching for his chair.*]

LA FOREST

Colinge, see how pale he is. Master, master.

MOLIÈRE

There, I'm better. [*He has seated himself.*] What was the lad saying, Colinge?

COLINGE

Nothing; that was all.

LA FOREST

Master, you must rest.

MOLIÈRE

That was all, Colinge?

[*And he is looking at him so directly that the old man turns away.*]

COLINGE

Yes. [*A pause. He is seeking a way out for he doesn't want to tell the rest.*] Do we play the new scenes tonight?

MOLIÈRE

Yes.

COLINGE

I'd best see to my lines then. My head is none too good at best.

[*He is about to go.*]

MOLIÈRE

If you slip, I'll improvise to help you. I will not pause or hesitate as you do now. What was Baron saying?

LA FOREST

It's almost curtain time. You should be dressed.

MOLIÈRE

That's easily done. Only Argan's wrapper over these same trousers here. [*Then to* COLINGE.] Well, my friend?

COLINGE

Master—

[*He falters.*]

MOLIÈRE

Well?

LA FOREST

[*Seeing the fear in the old man's eyes.*]

The fire is low. It's bitter cold in here. Colinge, fetch me some wood that's in the passage there.

[COLINGE *starts to go.*]

MOLIÈRE

Colinge, come over here. I know the news you have to tell.

COLINGE

There is none.

MOLIÈRE

His Majesty is coming to the play.

LA FOREST

No, master, not that, not that!

MOLIÈRE

Why not? I am Molière; I am ready to forgive.

LA FOREST

Colinge, is it so?

COLINGE

I—I—

LA FOREST

[*Seeing how the old man hesitates.*]

Master, master, later. Listen, some of the people are coming.

MOLIÈRE

The truth?

COLINGE

Master, I cannot lie to you.

MOLIÈRE

Well, then—

COLINGE

They were whispering at the cake shop that His Majesty refused to grant an audience.

MOLIÈRE

What's that, Colinge?

COLINGE

And Baron says that this afternoon the King goes to see Racine's tragedy at the Bourgogne.

MOLIÈRE

[*Vaguely repeating his words.*]
Racine—the King—

LA FOREST

[*He tries to get up but his strength fails him.*]
He is ill, ill. Tell them at the window that the play is off. Send one of the actors in to help carry him to bed.

COLINGE

Yes, that will be best.

[*But suddenly* MOLIÈRE *has sprung up and with a flash of his ancient power he speaks.*]

MOLIÈRE

No, wait, La Forest. Stand at the curtain. We play today. [*And there is something about him that makes them crouch back in terror.*] Go; do as I bid you.

COLINGE

[*His hand stretched out to him.*]
Master.

MOLIÈRE

[*Gently.*]
Dress, sir, or you will be late.

La Forest

[*Her voice frightened.*]
You'll play, Monsieur?

Molière

Yes, for whilst this afternoon His Majesty and the Court are at the Bourgogne for Racine's tragedy, I, Molière, here at the Palais Royal will play my "Invalid,"—my comedy—for the people of Paris who have come up for the fair. [*And from utter exhaustion he has sunk into his seat. Then as he slowly lifts his head and the curtain is falling.*] Light the candles, La Forest; I am ready.

When the curtain lifts, La Forest *is at the door to the left that leads to the stage. She is watching the performance. When the door is opened there can be heard from beyond the confused voices of the actors and the applause and laughter of the audience.* Chapelle *enters from the right.*]

Chapelle

How's it going, La Forest?

La Forest

Well, why aren't you out in front? Is there no room?

Chapelle

Too much.

La Forest

Why do you come back here?

Chapelle

[*Glancing at the table.*]

It's cosier.

[*He has taken up a bottle but finds it empty.*]

La Forest

I thought you were going to jump into the river.

Chapelle

Old woman, you are vindictive. Don't you like me about?

La Forest

I, Monsieur? Of course; you're about as welcome as salt to a wound.

Chapelle

Thanks.

La Forest

What do you thank me for? If I didn't know you loved the master I'd never let you pass that door.

Chapelle

[*Seriously.*]
Jean should not have played today.

La Forest

What could I do? We begged him but he would not listen.

Chapelle

Is there any danger?

La Forest

How should I know?

Chapelle

You are always whispering in the corner with the doctor. Women always do that; I think they like it.

La Forest

What do you know about women or anything else except the bottom of an empty glass?

Chapelle

That reminds me. Is there still a bottle that's unfinished?

La Forest

See for yourself. [*She points to the cupboard and then opens the door to the stage a little. A*

sound of laughter is heard from the front.] It's going well.

Chapelle

[*Stopping on his way to the cupboard.*] How does he seem, La Forest?

La Forest

It's near the last scene; I think all will be well.

[Chapelle *has taken up the bottle but suddenly he puts it down and comes over to her.*]

Chapelle

I'll watch with you.

La Forest

Listen, now he's speaking. His voice is stronger, isn't it?

Chapelle

Yes, it seems so. You must not let him act tomorrow. Take him to Auteuil; make him rest. Keep him there; I will come and see you.

La Forest

Why, Monsieur? We brought all the best wine up to Paris with us.

Chapelle

Your heart is hard, old woman.

La Forest

I've made it so lest life should break it. [*Then looking through to the stage.*] If only he is strong enough to finish.

[Colinge *enters from the stage.*]

La Forest

How is he? We cannot see well from here.

Colinge

Give me his robe. It's cold off stage when he makes his exit.

La Forest

[*Handing it to him.*]
How is he? Has he spoken to you?

Colinge

Yes, he seems better. The comedy is going well. He has them in his hand. He is happy. He need but lift his little finger and they laugh.

Chapelle

Are there more out in the theatre than last night?

Colinge

No, I do not think as many.

La Forest

Has he cut at all?

Colinge

No, he plays each scene a little slowly, that is all.

La Forest

[*Opening the door a bit.*]

Listen!

[*A pause. From the front the low murmur of voices is heard, then laughter.*]

La Forest

Surely he's the greatest actor in the world.

Colinge

Look, that's new business. He's sitting up.

Chapelle

I cannot see.

La Forest

Go 'round in front.

Chapelle

But—

La Forest

There'll be wine for supper. Come back later.

Chapelle

You don't hate me after all, do you?

La Forest

No, get out. And if you feel like laughing at

the comedy, why, laugh, even though you are a friend.

[Chapelle *exits.*]

Colinge

Has Armande come?

La Forest

Not yet.

Colinge

I will go back now. I like to be behind his chair waiting when he comes off. He may need something.

[The Actress Who Plays Toinette *enters from the stage.*]

The Actress who plays Toinette

Here, please, help me change this.

[*They help her to put on the* Doctor's *robe over her servant's dress.*]

La Forest

Is he very tired?

The Actress who plays Toinette

No, he's acting well. There's something about it all I can't make out.

La Forest

What? What?

The Actress who plays Toinette

I do not know. It's as though he poured his life into every word he's saying. Where is the syringe? When I enter with it that business always gets a laugh.

La Forest

[*Handing the "prop" to her.*]

Here.

Colinge

Hurry on; that's your cue.

[The Actress Who Plays Toinette *exits.*]

La Forest

As though he poured his life into it. She does not know what she is saying. Listen, go to the window. Isn't that a coach stopping at the door?

Colinge

I hear nothing.

La Forest

Go see.

Colinge

[*At the window, looking out.*]

You are right. It is Armande; she has come back.

La Forest

She has come back. To what, Colinge? Now go; he may need you.

[*And* Colinge *exits to the stage. Then she draws the curtain across the door and turns to face* Armande.]

La Forest

Madame, madame.

[*A pause.* Armande *is standing furtively on the threshold, uncertain what to do, what to say.*]

La Forest

Armande, come to me. Have you forgotten that I have been your nurse?

Armande

[*In her arms.*]
La Forest! La Forest!

La Forest

There, there, now you're a little girl again.

Armande

Does he know that I am here?

La Forest

Later, after the play, we will tell him.

Armande

I have ridden twice to the theatre and then turned back. I have been afraid. I stood on the quays down at the river. For a moment it seemed as though *that* would be best. Everything was drifting away to forgetfulness. I went nearer. I leaned over and then suddenly in one of the barges a woman began to sing and then life struck in at my heart all red and warm and the desire to live was more terrible than the will to die. I have been walking for an hour, back and forth, up and down, up and down, through the streets and then I found myself in a church somewhere across the river and suddenly the words of a prayer came to me and I thanked God for the song of the barge woman and then I came here.

La Forest

Madame.

Armande

Let me go to him.

La Forest

In a little while now the play will be over.

Armande

Jean, Jean. Why, see; everything is as it used to be. [*She is at his table.*] Look, a comedy.

His quill. [*She takes up some of the sheets of the manuscript.*] The ink is hardly dry.

LA FOREST

Madame, those are the little things, the little quiet things that save and steady the crazy world when men, their hearts gone mad, rush about like frightened children in a shower.

ARMANDE

That is how you used to speak to me long ago. It is good to be back. Just to hear his voice again, to feel his presence everywhere. Why, look; even his broth is waiting for him when the play is over.

LA FOREST

It should be nearly finished now.

[*She goes over to the door and stands for a moment listening. Then the door opens and instinctively* ARMANDE *steps back behind the fireplace.* THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE *enters, taking off the* DOCTOR'S *robe.*]

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

It's hard to keep pace with him now. He's playing with such spirit. Where are the props for the ballet?

LA FOREST

Here. [*And she hands the woman a bundle of*

books and some tall black hats.] See if there isn't some way to cut the business short; he seems tired.

THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS TOINETTE

No, he's all right.

[*And she exits.*]

ARMANDE

La Forest, when that door opened I was frightened. It might be better if—if— [*She has taken a step toward the door to the street.*] Now that I have come I am frightened. I will not be able to tell him all.

LA FOREST

After a while perhaps, Madame, little by little.

ARMANDE

Every night I have been on my knees praying for God's forgiveness and for his. Is there a hope, La Forest, that he will take me back?

LA FOREST

Though he has not spoken your name I think he has been waiting for your coming.

ARMANDE

Jean, Jean.

LA FOREST

But you must be weary, Armande. You have ridden all the day. Come here; sit by the fire.

[*A moment after* The Actress Who Plays Toinette *enters.*]

The Actress who plays Toinette

[*Not seeing* Armande.]
La Forest, help me off with this.

La Forest

[*Low, to the woman.*]
How is he?

The Actress who plays Toinette

I cannot make it out. Sometimes the scene goes swiftly, sometimes slow. Quick, I have another entrance now.

[*She exits.*]

Armande

Are there many out in front?

La Forest

Not many and in the old days all Paris waited, eager for his comedies, but now—

Armande

Things have gone badly?

La Forest

For months, Madame. Not once in all the time you've been gone has he been summoned to the

Palace. Some quarrel, Madame, something of which we do not know. Those happy days are over.

ARMANDE

You are wrong.

LA FOREST

What, Madame?

ARMANDE

Those days will come back.

LA FOREST

How, when we are forgotten at the Louvre?

ARMANDE

Soon, La Forest. I have seen the King.

LA FOREST

[*In amazement.*]
What, Madame?

ARMANDE

This morning. Boileau gained me admittance to His Majesty. I have craved his pardon. Old memories were awakened. He has forgiven Molière. He is coming to the play.

LA FOREST

Madame, when, when?

ARMANDE

This afternoon.

La Forest

Oh, God be praised. Armande, you've not come empty-handed. You've brought your love back to the master and the favour of the King. God grant he come in time. [*She rushes over to the door to the stage and stands listening. From the front comes the confused murmur of voices.*] Oh, Madame, if it could all be as it used to be! [*Suddenly she starts back.*] Madame, Madame!

Armande

What is it, La Forest?

La Forest

[*Her voice trembling.*]

Some one has missed a cue. Now it is all right again. [*She has turned and has swiftly shut the door as* Armande *comes toward her.*] Sit down, Madame; no, there by the fire.

Armande

La Forest, what is it; your face is suddenly so white?

La Forest

Nothing; we are worried. People do not come and the master—he—he—must rest. This endless playing—

Armande

We will care for him, you and I. [*From the front sounds the din of voices.*] It is going well.

[*She steps nearer the door.*]

La Forest

Madame, do not open that door.

Armande

Why, how strange you act. I've often watched the plays from here.

La Forest

The master has given orders. No one is to come or go.

Armande

From here we can catch a glimpse.

La Forest

Madame, Madame!

Armande

Why, what's the matter?

[*She has passed* La Forest.]

La Forest

Do as you will. Words cannot alter what is to be.

Armande

[*Nearer the door.*]

I will open it only a little, La Forest. No light will strike him.

La Forest

Madame, Madame!

Armande

What is it, La Forest?

[*The voices beyond grow louder.* Armande *rushes to the door.*]

La Forest

[*Stopping her.*]

Madame, don't, don't.

Armande

Why not?

La Forest

He—

Armande

What?

La Forest

Oh, God! it's as I feared. I thought there might be some hope, Madame; that is why I said nothing. But now, now—

ARMANDE

[*Almost fiercely, catching her by the wrists.*]

What? What? Look at me. I am no longer little Armande.

LA FOREST

[*And her voice is hardly audible.*]

Armande—the Master—

ARMANDE

[*Stumbling back weakly against the table.*]

Is it that—that?

LA FOREST

Yes. It is the last scene he will ever act. He is playing with his life.

ARMANDE

[*Sinking into* MOLIÈRE'S *chair at the table.*]

Jean! Jean!

[CHAPELLE *and* LA FONTAINE *enter from the street. At first they do not see* ARMANDE.]

LA FONTAINE

Jean is very weak. The play cannot go on.

ARMANDE

[*Stepping forward.*]

Tell them to draw the curtain.

La Fontaine

You have come back, Armande?

Armande

Yes, La Fontaine, but too late,—too late.

Colinge

[*Entering from the stage.*]

I can watch no longer. They think he's acting. They shriek with laughter and when he falters for his lines they jeer at him. Ring down the curtain; it's the end, the end.

La Forest

[*Flinging open the door to the stage.*]

Master! Master! Listen, the people are angry; they are shouting. He's coming. Master, master!

La Fontaine

[*Gently to* Armande.]

The shock may be too sudden if he sees you now. Wait in there; we will call you.

[Armande *exits into* Molière's *dressing-room and the next moment* Molière *enters leaning on the arm of the* Doctor *and* The Actress Who Plays Toinette. *The other actors, in the fantastic costumes of the ballet, crowd into the entrance from the stage.*]

MOLIÈRE

[*Staggering on the steps.*]

See, see; I'm better. I knew there was no danger in my comedy in counterfeiting death. There, I'm better. Did it go well?

[*They have led him to his chair at the table.*]

LA FOREST

Lie back, master.

[*She wraps the robe about him.*]

THE DOCTOR

[*Quietly to the others.*]

Stand back, all of you. Colinge, quickly, that stool for his feet, and now some water.

MOLIÈRE

La Forest, tell them we rehearse at ten tomorrow; remember—ten. [*And now he lies back weakly in his chair, his hand moving vaguely in front of him.*] That scene in my new comedy would be better thus. [*He feels in the air about him. At a sign from the* DOCTOR, LA FOREST *brings him some sheets of his manuscript and his quill.*] Yes, better thus. [*For a moment he sits in thought, then a smile comes into his eye and he writes a word or two.*] What do you think, La Forest? It's nearer life like this, isn't it? Listen. [*And*

with a trembling voice he reads what he has written.] "Madame, do you think it matters how many lovers you may have had?" [*Then the quill falls from his hand and the papers flutter to the floor.*] How cold, how cold it is!

La Forest

Master, your broth is waiting.

Molière

[*His hand stretching out to reach it.*]

Yes, give it to me. She makes her soup as strong as brandy, Claude; you best remember that, as strong as brandy.

The Doctor

[*Pouring something from a little flask into the water which* Colinge *has brought him.*]

Here, sir, drink this.

Molière

What? You would keep me living, sir? There's some quaint contradiction in it all. How often have I killed you doctors in my plays and now you'd have me live, now when I am ready to play the last great rôle which has no lines nor any business in it. How cold it is! I'm dying of the cold.

LA FOREST

No, master, by tomorrow—

[ARMANDE *is in the door behind him, unseen, her arms stretched out to him.*]

MOLIÈRE

By tomorrow, La Forest,—do you remember all those tomorrows of the long ago? Listen; that's the switch of the whip. How sweet the air is on the high-roads! We are going on, on. Look, the broad, white, swaying backs of the oxen—and over there, over there, Colinge, in the valley is the tower in the market-place. Don't worry, Colinge; it isn't going to rain. See, the clouds are blowing over. There'll be a crowd and we'll do business.

THE DOCTOR

Sir, you're very weak. Lie back.

MOLIÈRE

[*His voice for a moment stern as though he were addressing his company.*]

My friends, act your best today. The troupe of Molière is playing at the Louvre. [*And then suddenly he has straightened in his chair.*] What, Sire, it's this command that matters? I'll no longer be a lackey to your laughter. For now—the truth—the truth—but what matter all of that? [*And his voice is hardly audible.*] Armande, Armande!

[*And* ARMANDE *breaks from* LA FONTAINE *who is trying to restrain her and rushes over and throws herself at* MOLIÈRE'S *feet.*

ARMANDE

Jean, Jean!

MOLIÈRE

[*His hand before him as though to prove to his dying mind that it is she.*] Armande, is it you? Madame, it is time to dress. The play is beginning.

ARMANDE

Jean, Jean, see I have come back to you, to you and to your love.

MOLIÈRE

[*Suddenly the truth comes to him and he bends forward and clasps her in his arms.*] Armande, Armande, only for this little moment in eternity. Armande, Armande!

[*Then for a little space there is silence which is broken by the rumbling of a coach across the cobbles.*]

CHAPELLE

[*At the window.*]
Jean, the King, the King!

MOLIÈRE

Armande,—Armande—

COLINGE

Master, if you love us do not speak.

MOLIÈRE

Listen, now I hear their laughter. [*And with his last strength he has risen.*] See, all of them out there, all of them for ever. [*And he steadies himself as though to take his curtain call.*] I hear their laughter, their gay—bright—laugh—

[*And as he falls back dead in his chair, his arm strikes the table next to him and from it rattle to the floor his mirror and his box of make-up.*]

LA FOREST

[*Throwing herself on her knees before him.*]

Master, master!

[*And at this moment the* KING'S CHAMBERLAIN *enters pompously and noisily to announce His Majesty.*]

THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN

His Majesty the King. Make way for the King!

[*The people standing near the entrance to the stage fall back and the next minute* LOUIS *stands between the curtains.*]

LOUIS

Molière—

La Fontaine

Sire, you have come too late.

Louis

Sir, I am the King of France.

La Fontaine

[*Quietly, with lifted hand.*]

Too late—for death, the King of Kings, is here.

[*And as* La Fontaine *steps back all the people on the stage fall to their knees and* Louis *alone stands facing the chair where* Molière *lies.*]

Louis

Molière is dead?

Colinge

Master, master—

Armande

Jean, Jean!

[*And his dead arms are closed about her.*]

Louis

[*Lifting his hat for the first time in the theatre of* Molière.]

Molière is dead but in his name will live for ever the gay spirit, the brave laughter and the unconquered heart of France.

[*And as he bends before the dead body of* Molière *the curtain falls.*]

THE END

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